

THE
MYSTERY
OF THE
THIRD FORM ROOM

KATHLEEN M. WILLCOX



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SYLVIA LED THE WAY INTO THE DARKENED FORM ROOM
Fy. [P. 161]

THE MYSTERY OF THE THIRD FORM ROOM

BY

KATHLEEN M. WILLCOX



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TO
MY FATHER

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THE MYSTERY OF THE THIRD FORM ROOM

CHAPTER I *A Milestone*

NANCY!"

"Mums! Oh, Mums, you darling!"

Crash! went *Little Folks* as the small girl scrambled to her feet; there was a flash of blue skirt and black-stockinged legs across the daisied lawn, and Nancy was clinging round the neck of the smiling lady who had called to her from the porch.

"Oh, Mums, you dearest darling! It seems centuries since you went—just centuries!"

Lady Haverfield laughed as she moved toward the lawn. "It's hardly that," she cried gaily; "it's scarcely a month."

"A month and nearly two days this very minute," maintained Nancy stoutly. "But what does it matter now that you're back? Come and sit on these cushions, and talk to me, like a good Mums."

Nancy 'plumped up' a couple of cushions for her mother, and herself flopped down on to the third—a thin and lumpy object, covered in nondescript red twill.

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"Now talk," she ordered, leaning forward and clasping her arms round her knees. A moment later she plunged into a lengthy and animated account of her own trials and tribulations during the month she had spent at Uplands.

Nancy Christine Roden Haverfield, it may here be explained, was the only daughter of Sir Roden and Lady Haverfield, of Prior's Mead, in the county of Devon, and until lately of Sandrabad, a remote hill-station in India. Indeed, she was now their only child, for their son, the pride and darling of his parents' hearts, and the life of the lonely little hill-station, had disappeared, with his nurse, in mysterious and tragic circumstances some twelve years before this story opens. The stricken parents had hidden their grief deeply in their sad hearts, and Lady Haverfield rarely, if ever, made mention of her great sorrow, but the story, in its main outlines, had come to Nancy's knowledge from various sources. One and another, from time to time, had supplied the pathetic details, and Nancy had built up the complete story of the sunny-haired, laughing, two-years-old boy, sent in the charge of old Induhri, his faithful ayah, to spend the morning on the low, tree-dotted hills behind the bungalow. His pretty, smiling mother had waved good-bye to the pair as the old nurse slowly climbed a stretch of rising ground and disappeared, her adored charge in her arms, behind a clump of bamboo. From that moment the baby was never seen again. Two hours

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later came the news of a small, but possibly no less dangerous, rising of a neighbouring native tribe, and the anxious father had ridden hot-foot after Induhri and little Derek, but had found no trace of either. An organized search was instituted, but it was not until the next morning that the body of the ayah, horribly wounded, was found in the river, nearly twenty miles from the Haverfield dwelling. Later in the day another party of searchers, within a mile or two of the bungalow, came upon the spot which was undoubtedly the scene of the savage attack on the helpless pair. The devoted woman had clearly put up a brave fight against her assailants, for the ground bore unmistakable signs of a prolonged and fierce struggle. Bushes and grass were bent and crushed in all directions, while knots of glossy black hair were found clinging to the twigs. In the path lay a tiny kid shoe, a handful of scattered beads, and—worst sight of all—little Derek's white linen hat, with a ghastly stain on the crown. Further search continued for many days, but as time went on and no traces of the child were found, the agonized parents were forced gradually to abandon hope.

From that time on a double share of love and affection was lavished on six-months-old Nancy, who but for her extraordinary sweetness of disposition would have been in a fair way to becoming a very spoilt little girl indeed. Her father used to remark that there wasn't a more disgracefully pampered young lady in the Indian Empire, but then—

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as Nancy herself used to remind him on such occasions —no one really knew whether to believe what he said or not when his eyes twinkled like that. So her father held his peace, and Nancy continued to be spoiled, and altogether life ran very smoothly and pleasantly for the child in the pretty bungalow on the hills.

She was the constant companion of her mother, to whom she was devoted, except for the short daily periods she spent at a neighbouring bungalow, where she shared the prim old-fashioned governess of the Spencer children, who had taught their father before them when he was a gay, mischief-loving boy at home in England. Then one day came the great news, in a stiff official-looking letter, and Nancy's mother, with mixed feelings, came to tell her young daughter that Daddy's Uncle Wilbert, a strange and eccentric old man, and his son Stephen had both been drowned while boating off Madeira, and that as a result they would all have to leave the bungalow and go across the sea to live in England. For Uncle Wilbert, of whom in truth Nancy knew but little, had been a baronet with great estates in Devonshire, and by his death and that of his only son the little-known engineer in far-away India became Sir Roden Haverfield and heir to his uncle's great title and broad lands.

After that day life seemed to the wondering child to fly on wings for a few weeks, for the family lost no time in hurrying to England as the solicitor's letter had advised.

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Arrived in London, Sir Roden had plunged into a whirl of business, while Lady Haverfield proceeded to Lincolnshire, to the home of two elderly aunts, where she left Nancy, as she explained, "just for a few days," while she returned to London to be with her husband during his busy and wearying time.

The few days had lengthened into a month, and though at first Nancy had revelled in the sights and sounds of the English countryside in spring, she soon began to long passionately for her beloved mother, and to chafe a little under the somewhat stern rule of the two old ladies who were the mistresses of Uplands. It can therefore be imagined that her joy at the sight of her mother was sincere, though it cannot perhaps be said with certainty that it was not mingled with some feelings of apprehension, for the little girl had been wisely and gently warned that for some weeks Father and Mother would be very busy, and that some arrangement would have to be arrived at regarding Nancy herself during that time.

She had lately been fortifying herself with the reflection that it could not matter much what the 'arrangement' was, and that almost anything would be better than remaining on at Uplands and submitting to the strict rule, and the somewhat old-fashioned dullness, of the life led by Aunt Emma and Aunt Mary Rivington. But now the actual moment had come, and Nancy could, as she inwardly phrased it, "feel it in her bones" that the arrangement had

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been completed, and that the object of Lady Haverfield's visit was to make known to her the dreaded plan in all its details. Accordingly she eyed her mother with considerable misgiving as that lady made some remark about the weather, which the over-suspicious Nancy regarded as being "utterly unnecessary, and only said to gain time."

After a moment she stirred slightly on her cushion and broke the ice. "Mums, dear," she began, in a voice which she vainly tried to keep quite steady, "what have you and Daddy decided to d-do with me?"

"Do with you, darling? Don't talk like that, Nancy mine. It sounds as if you thought Daddy and I were going to sell you, or give you away. At the worst it will only be for two or three months, until all the London business is finished, and we are settled at Prior's Mead, and I have—— But it is a long story. I must tell you."

Nancy was silent for a few moments, and when she spoke her voice was strained and hoarse.

"Yes, please tell me. It is better I should know the worst."

Lady Haverfield laughed softly, as she laid her hand gently on her daughter's shoulder. "Don't look so tragic, girlie," she pleaded. "You have nothing to worry about, and even 'the worst,' as you call it, will be, I hope, very pleasant. Come, let me tell you all about it; I am sure that there is one part at least which will appeal specially to you."

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Nancy cheered visibly, and settling herself more comfortably on her cushion, one hand resting idly in her mother's lap, she prepared to listen.

" You know, dear," continued Lady Haverfield, " there is much to be done yet in London. Of course the solicitors quite well know who Daddy is—indeed, as you know, they sent for him—but there are still the inevitable lawyer-like demands for written proof that it is really Sir Wilbert's nephew who has come from India, and not an impostor. All this will take time, though I am glad to be able to tell you a great many of the necessary formalities have been gone through during the last month. But after this Daddy will still be far from free of his work. Some weeks will be taken up in visiting many business men with whom Sir Wilbert had dealings, and making himself known to them as the new baronet. Then, too, a considerable part of the Haverfield estate lies in and around London, and Daddy will have to call on the tenants and make their acquaintance, and to ask them about their houses and lands, and the improvements they wish made to them. And that brings me to the subject of Prior's Mead. Nancy, darling, you will love it; it is like a house in a fairy-tale, or rather will be. Daddy and I only ran down for a night, but it is our home already in our minds, and we both long to show it to you."

" What is it like? " began Nancy. " When can I see it? "

" Certainly not yet, darling; and I will tell you

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why. All this brings me to the little story I have to tell you. Would you like to hear it now or later?"

Nancy wriggled. "Oh, now, please," she begged, "'specially if it's exciting."

Lady Haverfield smiled. "Well," she mused, "perhaps not exciting, but certainly interesting, more especially as it concerns real people, indeed Daddy's own uncle. Uncle Wilbert, you must know, was married a little over thirty years ago, and had one son Stephen, who was born a year later. When little Stephen was two years old his young mother was suddenly taken from him, after a few days' illness. Uncle Wilbert was devoted to his pretty wife, and her death dealt him a blow from which he never recovered. He remained at Prior's Mead for a few years, but without his wife the place was distasteful to him, for it served but to recall painful memories of his three happy years with Stephen's mother. But for his intense love for the child she left behind he would certainly have left Prior's Mead at once. As it was he waited only till Stephen was old enough, and then left the house—as it has turned out, never to return. He would not let the place, for it seems that he was always thinking of returning there, but he could never overcome his dread of doing so, and even in spite of his great love for Stephen, he kept the child year after year away from his inheritance. So the two travelled about, never staying long in one place, the old man becoming more and more eccentric, until during the last

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few years, as his lawyers think, his mind was quite deranged. At last he drifted to Madeira, where he stayed for seven years, and where, as you know, he and Stephen met their deaths. But never for a night has he been in England since he and his son left Prior's Mead in such sadness. And so, dear, you will imagine that the old house is very neglected; for though the old man allowed his solicitors to keep his lands in fair order, no hand has been suffered to touch Prior's Mead for many, many years. Indeed, as Daddy and I saw it the other day, it would have required a far more discerning eye than yours, little woman, to see its great beauty. Weeds are growing everywhere, and in some places are waist-high, while the grass in the drive and courtyard was knee-deep. Many windows are broken, and chimneys in ruin, and indeed desolation reigns everywhere. But it is a fine old home, with its diamond-paned windows and timbered gables, and the garden has been, and still can be, a dream-garden. An army of workers has started to clear it up and make it tidy for us, and when you can see and appreciate its beauty you shall be taken down to make its acquaintance. That is a promise."

Nancy sighed. She was gifted with a vivid imagination, and in spite of the picture of desolation and ruin her mother had painted for her, her mind's eye found no difficulty in penetrating the outer mask of weeds and broken windows, and seeing the true beauty of what lay beneath.

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"I'm sure I shall love it if you do," she remarked, "and I'm just longing to see it."

"Well," replied Lady Haverfield, "that part will not take many weeks. But now I am coming to another part of Uncle Wilbert's life story. About fourteen years ago he and Stephen spent some months in Barcelona, and while they were there the old man did a very strange thing, and one which greatly surprised the few people who knew of it. Although every one thought that he could never recover from the shock of the death of Stephen's mother, and that no one could take her place in his life, he suddenly married a young Spanish girl, whom he had only known for a few weeks. The marriage was a hasty one, and I do not think he ever really loved the girl, but it is certain that she was able to afford him some happiness, for when she died, a year or two later, she left Uncle Wilbert a wee daughter, who is now of course about thirteen years old, of whom he was very fond."

Nancy's eyes shone softly. "How strange," she murmured, "just my age. What was she like, I wonder?"

"What is she like, you mean, don't you, dearie, for she is a living, present-day, little girl and your own cousin, not one of the little misty figures of the past like Stephen's mother. As to what she is like, I cannot tell you, as I have never seen her, or even heard her name, except that she is a Haverfield, of course, like you. But I do know that Uncle Wilbert

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dearly loved this child of his old age, and that she was to him as the light of his eyes. Stephen, too, I think, was deeply attached to his little half-sister."

Nancy was silent for a few moments, and when at length she spoke it was to ask a somewhat unexpected question.

"When we came from Bombay did the *Ocean Queen* sail anywhere near Madeira?"

Lady Haverfield shook her head. "No, dear, at least not until after we left her, for you remember we landed at Marseilles and came home across France to save time. Madeira, you know, is well out in the Atlantic, beyond the Strait of Gibraltar. Why do you ask?"

"Because I should like to see Uncle Wilbert's little girl," replied Nancy. "I'm sure she must be nice."

Lady Haverfield's eyes filled with tears as she slid an arm round Nancy's shoulders, and there was a quaver in the beautiful voice when she spoke again.

"Nancy mine, if you only knew how happy you have made me! Have you thought, darling, of the poor little girl's position? Sir Wilbert knew but few people on the island, and now he and his son are both dead the poor little maid is left alone, a stranger in a very nearly strange land."

Lady Haverfield stopped, as if waiting for some reply from the girl by her side, and she had not to wait in vain.

"She must come and live with us, mustn't she?"

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cried the child eagerly. "She has no one else, and we are her relatives, and she can play with me at Prior's Mead. Oh, Mums, I should love it! Do say you'll write at once and ask her to come."

She raised her eyes, shining and big with excitement, to her mother's face, where they met the gaze of another pair no less radiant.

"Yes, dearest heart," was the reply, "that is what Daddy and I think and wish for, as you do. We only knew of her existence a fortnight ago, but we at once decided that she must come to us, for we realize that she is a sacred charge, given to us by God to love and care for. Ever since then we have been hoping and praying that our little girlie would be unselfish enough to share her home and her pleasures with this lonely little orphan, and oh, Nancy! we have not hoped in vain. But there is one thing more, dearest. We want you to crown our happiness by one more act of unselfishness. We want you to spare Daddy and me for a few weeks, to go ourselves to Madeira to bring home your new cousin."

For one moment Nancy was silent, and then she flung out her hands, and burst into a torrent of words.

"Oh, Mums, no! Don't leave me again," she pleaded. "I've been so longing to be with you again, and Madeira is so far away. Please write instead, and tell Uncle Wilbert's little girl to come herself, only don't leave me, please don't. You know I——"

She stopped, for Lady Haverfield had laid a

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restraining hand on her arm, and was speaking, gently and pleadingly.

"Hush, darling! Listen one moment, for I am sure that when my little girl has heard the whole story she will not be so selfish as to refuse to spare us for such a short time. To begin with, Madeira is not so very far away, and Daddy and I hope to be back in London again in less than a month."

But Nancy was by no means comforted, and as her mother paused for an instant she broke out again.

"But must you both go? Couldn't it be just one? Or couldn't she come alone?"

"No, darling," was the reply, "and I will tell you why not. Uncle Wilbert's daughter was one of the party on that sad day when he and his son were drowned, and although the little girl was saved, the shock, both of her own narrow escape and of the loss of her father and brother, has been very severe, and though it all happened nearly four months ago, she is certainly not strong enough to make such a long journey alone. Daddy must certainly go, in order to settle up his uncle's affairs, and no less certainly must I go, to give my love and care to our uncle's lonely child. Do you understand me, darling?"

Nancy's lip quivered. She was a brave little maiden by nature, but she had just gone through her first separation from her mother, and it did seem hard to have to repeat the process just when her mother appeared to have returned to her. But she blinked away her tears and gulped hard as she

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replied, "Yes, Mums, of course you must go; and I'll try not to mind very much. Shall I stay here, while you're away, with Aunt Emma and Aunt Mary?"

Lady Haverfield's voice had a strange, glad ring in it as she made her reply.

"That's my brave girlie. You will be glad afterward, darling, that you decided rightly." She paused for a moment, and then went on, speaking more slowly.

"No, darling, Daddy and I think you would be happier elsewhere. You see"—her eyes twinkled merrily—"I knew Aunt Emma and Aunt Mary of old, and though I was glad to accept their invitation for you for the past month, I do not think that they are the very best guardians that can be found for a lively little girl like you. So Daddy and I have hit upon another plan. Prior's Mead is less than a mile from the little village of Lexfield, and at Lexfield there is a big and popular girls' school, called St Hilda's, where Daddy and I propose to send you as a day pupil when we are settled at Prior's Mead. It is kept by a Miss Primrose, whom I am sure you will love, for I have seen her; and she is quite ready to take my little girl as a boarder for her first term, while her Mother and Daddy are away in Madeira."

Nancy's hands were clasped tightly together, and her voice shook a little, but she met her mother's gaze with dry eyes.

"Will it really and truly be only for one term?" she queried, a little unsteadily.

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"Yes, darling, I promise you that: indeed it may be slightly less, for you shall come to us as soon as ever we reach Prior's Mead. And while we are away I will write to you often."

There was silence for a few moments, and when at length Nancy spoke her voice was steadier, and she even smiled a little.

"I shall hate it, Mums, every minute of it, but I'll try t-to be good and—and brave. And you will hurry home, won't you?"

"Yes, yes, darling, at the first possible moment. And you and Daddy and I will have a few days together in London first, for St Hilda's does not open till May 13th, and this is only the third."

"Oh, dear," sighed Nancy, "only ten days, and then—" She laughed weakly.

"Yes, darling, but we will have a happy ten days, and I am sure Daddy will be pleased to know that his girlie is taking her news so bravely."

Nancy coloured, for praise from Sir Roden was always honest and worth winning.

"It will be a change to you, darling, I am sure," went on Lady Haverfield, "to mingle with so many young people after knowing so few; but I am sure my Nancy will do us credit. Going to school for the first time is a milestone in every girl's life, and one she can never forget. Sometimes it brings its little troubles in its train, and for a while everything seems gloomy; but you have only to set your teeth and peg away, and you will win through in the

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end. And now let us go and find the aunties. Do you think it will be time for their resurrection yet?"

Nancy scrambled to her feet and gave vent to a shaky laugh. 'Resurrection' seemed a funny word to apply to the awakening from their afternoon nap of the Misses Rivington, and Nancy was glad to find something to be amused at, for she was by nature a sunny soul. Lady Haverfield, too, made merry pretence of having to be assisted to her feet, and finally suggested a race across the lawn. Which event was, as Nancy afterward phrased it, "enough to make a bishop laugh."

CHAPTER II

Preparations and Partings

A THALIE, your tea, my dear. One lump of sugar, is it not? And will you take bread and butter, or toasted scone?"

Miss Mary Rivington, an upright, white-haired lady, attired in a stiff and antiquated frock of lavender silk with ruffles of priceless lace at the neck and sleeves, was presiding over the tea-tray in the stately old-fashioned drawing-room at Uplands. She looked like a queen as she sat there, with the afternoon sun streaming in through the French windows, and touching with flecks of silver her abundant white hair, her slim wrinkled hands, and the large antique brooch at her breast.

Lady Haverfield took the proffered cup of tea, and selected the daintiest of triangular scones, all crisp and hot, from the plate at her elbow.

"And how has the world been treating Uplands and its inhabitants, since I was here last?" she began, as she stirred her tea with the fragile old apostle spoon.

Miss Mary helped herself daintily to a wafer-like slice of bread and butter.

"Things are going fairly well, as yet," she replied. "We have had some trouble with Bertha, our new kitchen-maid, who insisted on wearing caps edged

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with lace, instead of the customary embroidery. However, she submitted at last, and Emma and I made her a joint present of six caps made after the pattern required by our dear mother."

The old lady heaved a gentle sigh; whether as a tribute to her long-departed parent's excellent taste in embroidered caps, or as a protest against her kitchen-maid's deplorable taste in lace ones, cannot be said with certainty, and sought comfort in a minute sip of remarkably weak tea.

"While we are on the subject of dress styles," began an acid voice from the other side of the table, "I should like to tell you, Athalie, that neither my sister nor I approve of the three summer dresses you sent from London for Nancy. We consider them highly improper. Are you aware, my dear Athalie, that the sleeves of all three come no farther than to the elbow, and that neither of them has a collar? My sister and I felt sure that you could not know this, and accordingly we returned the dresses to their box till you yourself should be able to send them back to London. Nancy, meanwhile, has been wearing skirts and blouses."

The speaker, as her words indicate, was Miss Emma Rivington, a lady whom there is not the least need to describe, since she was but a second edition of her sister in every detail, save that her frock was of grey silk instead of lavender, while her expression of countenance was, if anything, rather sterner and more uncompromising than that of the younger Miss

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Rivington. She set down her cup as she finished speaking, and seemed to challenge an answer from her niece—Nancy she completely ignored.

Lady Haverfield's laugh sounded somewhat annoyed. "My dear Aunt Emma, I can assure you I knew perfectly well what I was sending for Nancy. She has been accustomed to the lightest of clothing in India, and I hastened to send her just these three ready-made dresses to go on with, as the spring has been so warm. When I am in London again I——" She stopped, for the two old ladies were regarding her with unfeigned astonishment.

"Do you mean to inform us," broke out Miss Mary at last, "that you, deliberately, and while in full possession of your eyesight, selected for your daughter three such utterly vulgar and impossible frocks as are locked into my wardrobe upstairs? Is that your true meaning, or do I mistake you?"

"Of course you do not, Aunt Mary," replied Lady Haverfield. "I selected the frocks myself, each one of them. I have not the least objection to Nancy's wearing them."

Miss Emma sighed, and straightened her dress. "That may be so," she remarked icily. "Over your likes and dislikes my sister and I have no control. But we refuse to allow any relative of ours, young or old, while staying under our roof, to make a deplorable exhibition of herself in frocks too small to cover a child of two."

Lady Haverfield laughed her old merry laugh, and

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patted Miss Emma's hand. "Come, Aunt Emma," she cried gaily, "we won't quarrel over that. Nancy can very well endure the hated blouse and skirt for one more day. That is all it will amount to, for I must take her back with me to London to-morrow, without fail. We have much to do, for her father and I have made arrangements for her to enter a boarding-school in ten days' time."

Miss Emma smiled grimly. "Indeed," she said, "I am glad to hear that. From what I know of modern boarding-schools the young ladies who attend them are not encouraged to go through life half undressed. I think that in a good many cases a little wholesome discipline does not come amiss, especially in cases where the young person in question has been deplorably spoilt. Yes, Parker, I did ring. You may remove the tea-tray, and bring me my spectacles."

Half an hour later, in the privacy of the room she shared with her mother, Nancy donned, one after another, the much-discussed summer frocks, and executed a lively war-dance before the mirror, giving utterance the while to a rapid fire of quotations from the respective speeches of the Misses Rivington.

"Young ladies who attend boarding-schools are not encouraged to go through life half undressed," she finished, clasping her hands piously together and rolling her eyes heavenward, in droll and exaggerated imitation of her respective relatives. "Oh—oh! It was splendid," she gasped, "absolutely splendid!"

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And as for you, you darling, you squashed them beautifully; you really did! I felt quite glad I was truly going to boarding-school, so that you could tell Aunt Emma so, and shut her up."

Lady Haverfield smiled. She was glad to note that Nancy, with her customary brightness of disposition, was becoming already more reconciled to the coming separation. The object of her thoughts executed one more wild whirl, and then, with a gasp, threw herself on to the sofa, and lay back against her mother's arm in a gale of laughter.

When Nancy awoke the next morning it was to find that her mother was already astir, and, assisted by Parker the parlourmaid, was busy packing her own and Nancy's belongings into a large trunk. She lay watching the scene with amused eyes, for Parker, like everything and every one at Uplands, was exasperatingly slow, while Lady Haverfield was neat-fingered and very quick in her movements. Presently all was finished and Parker left the room, promising to give orders to James to be at the door with the carriage not later than nine o'clock. Lady Haverfield addressed and tied on some labels and then turned to Nancy's little bed.

"Now, darling, you must get up, as quickly as you can, for it is nearly eight o'clock."

Nancy sprang up instantly, for was she not to see that wonderful, rushing London to-day, and better still, the tall, jolly Daddy of whom she was so fond?

"You know, Mums," she remarked as she buttoned

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her neat white blouse, "I should just love to leave one of those 'vulgar' dresses, beautifully packed and addressed, on my bed, as a present to Aunt Emma and Aunt Mary. It would be something to remember me by."

Lady Haverfield laughed and pinched her daughter's cheek playfully as they left the room together. "My daughter is a parcel of wickedness," she said with mock severity as they descended the stairs. "I don't wonder that her unfortunate and sorely tried aunts are glad to see her depart."

"I wonder if they are really," said Nancy softly, as they entered the breakfast-room.

The two old ladies were already down, and were seated one at either side of the fireplace like lions at the base of a monument. They rose at the entrance of their visitors and each lady bestowed upon Nancy and her mother what the small girl always privately designated "a fierce kiss." There were a few commonplace remarks on either side, and the meal began.

"How will you like to be sleeping in a boarding-school to-night?" inquired Miss Mary, as she handed Nancy her cup of coffee.

Nancy gave a quick gasp and turned questioning eyes on her mother, who smiled back reassuringly.

"No, not to-night, Aunt Mary. You forget; St Hilda's does not open for ten days yet. I am taking Nancy to London first, to have a splendid time before settling down to school-life. There are heaps of exciting things to be done."

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Miss Emma grunted. "Most unwise. The child will only find that her misery at school is the greater by reason of the time of frivolity that has preceded it."

Nancy paled, and Miss Mary, whose heart was perhaps a little more tender than her sister's, appeared to notice the fact. She threw a hasty glance in Miss Emma's direction. "There is no need to frighten the child any more than is necessary," she announced, trying vainly to suppress a tell-tale hoarseness in her voice. "Nancy, dear, will you not have a little marmalade?"

Nancy flashed a grateful glance at the old lady. She fully appreciated the importance of being called "dear," instead of "my dear." Only once before had Miss Mary left out the "my"—on the first night of Nancy's stay, when she had come upon the little girl crying, her head buried in the pillow, for her beloved 'Mums.'

Miss Emma, needless to say, had never been able to dispense with the possessive pronoun, and Nancy privately thought she never would. That lady sat in grim silence after Miss Mary's reproof, and the meal proceeded.

The short time after breakfast seemed to fly on wings; and in no time, as it seemed to Nancy, the Uplands carriage, with its sleek and sedate pair of bay horses, was at the door. Nancy had been vastly amused throughout by this old-fashioned equipage, and had even ventured a little mild fun at its expense, but the ladies had more than once assured her that

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they regarded motors as terrifying and death-dealing inventions, and that nothing would induce them to change Dan and Don and the carriage for a snorting, rattling motor-car, to say nothing of the insult which would thus be offered to the feelings of James, the coachman.

Aunt Emma's farewells were conducted in the privacy of the hall, and were characteristic of the old lady's disposition. Miss Mary, however, followed the travellers out on to the terrace, and there was a tear on her cheek as she kissed Nancy at the carriage door.

"Good-bye, my child," she said, as she fumbled in the deep pocket of her gown. "I have been glad to have you. You are a bright little soul, and I hope you will be happy at school and that some day you may come to us again. There"—pressing ten shillings into Nancy's hand—"that is to buy something to use at school; something to—to remember old Aunt Mary by." Then, with a half-ashamed and blushing return to her customary grimness—"Not sweets, now, and trashy stuff, but something useful, and you're to write and tell me what it is. Good-bye. Good-bye, Athalie. Mind your hand, child. Yes, James; drive on."

And so Nancy left Uplands, and was whirled away through the sunny lanes to the station, and so to London.

The next few days seemed like a glorious dream to the bewildered Nancy. As if sympathizing with the

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child in her approaching separation from them, Sir Roden and Lady Haverfield vied with each other in their attempts to make her happy during the last days.

Sir Roden, indeed, gave up his business completely for a whole week, and devoted each afternoon to taking his young daughter to visit all the principal sights of the great city—to Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament, to St Paul's and the Tower, to Madame Tussaud's and the Zoo. Nancy had some difficulty in deciding which of these visits was most memorable, but finally, after much reflection, she awarded the palm, to her father's intense amusement, to the Zoo, declaring that the elephants looked homelike and reminded her of India.

There was one never-to-be-forgotten day, too, when the pair, having visited the National Gallery, and—almost more splendid still—partaken of delectable strawberry ices at The Corner House, returned to their hotel by way of the Mall, and saw—oh, wonderful sight!—the Queen herself leaving Buckingham Palace in a carriage, with prancing horses and liveried attendants.

The mornings were spent in shopping, when mother and daughter drove from shop to shop, each seeming to Nancy to be larger and more bewildering than the last, and accumulating what appeared to her to be an almost regal horde of dresses, hats, and other wearing apparel for school use.

The day before the end of her stay in London Nancy

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wrote a long letter to Aunt Mary Rivington. Had you asked her a fortnight before to write such a letter she would have declared it impossible, since she could think of nothing to say that would have the slightest interest for her elderly relative, or even the remotest chance of meeting with her approval. Now, however, since those few minutes at the carriage door, Nancy began to feel a new sense of sympathy for the stern old lady, whose heart, in spite of its grimness, clearly held one or two tender spots however tiny. The letter was characteristic of Nancy's transparent truthfulness, and unfailing knack of finding pleasure in everything.

Harleigh Mansions

Andover Street, W.

May 12th

My dear Aunt Mary,

London is splendid! I'm sure you'd just love it. The noises and the rush of traffic and people are really lovely when you are used to it. We had a nice journey up, at least all except the last bit. There was a breakdown on the line, and the train had to stay still for more than two hours. It got so hot in our carriage that one lady fainted. I didn't mind it at all, really, because there was a pond quite close to the line, where some boys were having races with toy boats, and I watched them.

We've had a splendid time since we got here. Daddy hasn't done any work. He's spending his time taking

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me to all the exciting places. We've been to the Tower of London, where they put Lady Jane Grey and the poor little Princes, and, oh! heaps of famous people; and we've seen Westminster Abbey and the Zoo and Madame Tussaud's. It does seem queer to think that there really was a time when every one wore funny long dresses like you and Aunt Emma. But there were heaps of ladies like it at Madame Tussaud's. Have you ever seen them?

Talking of dresses makes me think of the new ones I've got for school. Aunt Mary, I'm so excited about some of them! At St Hilda's we have to wear a special kind of green dress for every day, so of course I had to have some of those, but there are others which are for dancing and things like that. Several are plain white, but one is the loveliest pale pink you ever saw, and has heaps of weeny frills.

I spent your ten shillings, Mother says, most sensibly. I've got the duckiest little 'Bee' clock, with an alarum, for my mantelpiece; so I need never be late for anything, need I? Mums gave me a splendid fountain-pen, with "Nancy Haverfield" on a gold band at one end, and a watch to wear on my wrist. Daddy's present is just the thing I always wanted, and never could have in India—a bicycle. We are allowed to have them at St Hilda's.

, I really must stop, Aunt Mary. Mums wants me to go and see her pack my trunk, so that I shall know where to find everything.

Please give my love to Aunt Emma, and Parker, and

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Dan and Don, and James. And I send you some for yourself, also heaps of thanks for the dear little 'Bee,' and all your kindness to me. Do write to me when I'm at St Hilda's. I shall be awfully lonely—at first.

Your loving niece,

NANCY

The letter went speeding on its way, and with it sped the last few hours of the holidays. Even as it was posted, had Nancy but known it, a few early arrivals were being welcomed at St Hilda's; and the next morning, as Miss Mary opened the missive at the breakfast table, her young relative, accompanied by a tall bronzed father and a pile of luggage, was being driven rapidly across London, *en route* for Paddington, Devonshire, and—St Hilda's. The heart-breaking parting from her beloved 'Mums' had been gone through at home, by Lady Haverfield's desire, since she thought that the excitement of the journey down would prove a valuable restorative of her daughter's spirits. Nancy, with characteristic good sense, had instantly seen the wisdom of the proposal, but she privately thought that it would at least have been pleasanter to have had someone to talk to while her father saw to the luggage, instead of being forced to stand alone on the crowded platform, with nothing more entertaining to do than to study advertisements of 'Mackintosh's Toffee,' 'Stephen's Inks,' *The Daily Express*, and 'Fry's Pure Cocoa and Chocolate.'

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However, her companion returned at length, and the pair selected a carriage and disposed of their smaller belongings. Nancy sat somewhat silent as the train moved out of the station and rattled over the network of lines outside the great terminus, but she soon cheered up as they flew along in the bright sunshine, amid country which seemed to the Indian-bred child as beautiful as fairyland. Farther and farther south-west roared the mighty train — and hour by hour during its progress the country grew greener and more varied in character; till at length it approached the sea. Then followed a glorious half-hour, while mile after mile of firm sands, red cliffs, and sun-kissed blue waves flew by, and early holiday-makers waved happily to the passing train. It all came to an end at length, however, as the best of things must do. Teignmouth station flew past the windows, and Shaldon with its white cottages and long wooden bridge, and then the train headed inland toward Newton Abbot, and the journey was at an end.

The village of Lexfield has no station, and the visitor to it must make his way down the little branch-line as far as Netherstoke, and from there proceed by road. Nancy and her father had little difficulty in securing the one means of conveyance the village afforded, an ancient cab, drawn by a sleepy horse of similar age. The afternoon was a glorious one, and Nancy, though she dreaded the events of the next few hours, greatly enjoyed the drive. For the most part the road lay between tall hedges, thickly covered

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with young green leaves, and showing here and there creamy patches of budding may-blossom. Now and again, through some gateway, or from the top of a hill, appeared peeps of moorland and sea, or of villages nestling in hollows, buried deep in an ocean of apple-blossom.

"This is Lexfield," said Sir Roden at length, "and St Hilda's lies at the top of that hill. But I have asked the driver to take us first to the other end of the village, so that you may have a peep at Prior's Mead. But we will only look at it from the road, because——"

"Yes," replied Nancy quickly, "I know, because M—Mums wants to be the first to show it to me when it's all finished."

She left her seat and leaned far out of the carriage window, noting with eager eyes every detail of the tiny village she was to learn to know so well.

It consisted of one straggling street, with white-washed, thatched-roofed cottages on either side, each one swathed in a profusion of early roses, or mantled in a thick, homely-looking cloak of ivy. Near the centre of the village was a tiny general shop which, judging from the abundance and variety of its stock, might justly have disputed with Mr William Whiteley the title of "Universal Provider." It also bore a wooden notice informing all and sundry that here was to be found Lexfield Post Office. A near-by cottage was similarly labelled, "Police Station." Over the way stood a trim square house, a little dis-

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tance from the road, whose neat white gate bore a brass plate with the inscription "Dr Drury." Farther down was the picturesque well, the smith's forge, and the ancient Duke of Wellington inn, with its roomy porch on whose age-blackened oak seat sat some half-dozen of the village rustics, smoking their pipes and drinking ale from shining pewter mugs. Round a bend in the road rose the hoary tower of the old church, casting its kindly shadow over the graves in the churchyard, the quaint wooden lych-gate, with its wee tiled roof, and the two sentinel yew trees. Another small gate led from the churchyard to the rectory garden, on whose tiled pathway an old grey sheep-dog dozed in the sunshine. Then for a time no houses were to be seen and Nancy sat down again, till at last her father called her to his side of the carriage.

"Here, little maid, come and look at Prior's Mead."

The house lay on the right side of the road, overlooking a gently sloping valley through which ran the Teign on its way to the sea, a glimpse of which could be seen in the distance. When Nancy first looked out she could only see a small dark plantation of fir-trees, in the shelter of which stood the lodge-keeper's cottage. One of the great gates stood open, and, leaning far out of the window, Nancy could see a builder's cart standing in the drive. Then the cab moved on and the house came into view from behind the trees. It was a long rambling building, with mullioned windows and grey, timbered gables;

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above the church-like porch rose a small square tower, with quaint, leaded windows. From the terrace the ground sloped away sharply to a sunken garden, and from there more gently to a reed-girt stream, beyond which was a stretch of grass-land, a low stone wall, and then the road. Nancy and her father left the cab and paced up and down the road, the child feasting her eyes on the scene and asking unceasing questions. At length Sir Roden decided that if he was to catch his train to Newton Abbot it was high time to be moving, so back went the cab through the village and up the hill at the other end, till at last Nancy had her first view of St Hilda's.

The house, though not specially built for a school, was yet a modern one, built of grey stone, and eminently suited to its present purpose. It was a house of three stories, the rooms on the top floor having dormer windows, while at each end of the long, imposing front was a bay window, running up to the rooms on the first floor also. Along the whole length of the house, between the upstairs bay windows ran a wide, white-painted, wooden balcony, on to which, in addition to the bays at either end, opened the five intervening windows. The main entrance, in the centre of the front, was approached by a shallow flight of steps leading down to a paved terrace running round three sides of the house, on to which opened certain of the ground-floor rooms by means of French windows. The house was surrounded by a noble sweep of well-kept lawn, dotted

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over with glowing flower-beds, and on the east side of the house could be seen a range of six tennis-courts, surrounded by a neat privet hedge topped by a lofty stretch of netting. Beyond the tennis-courts, whence came the sound of girls' voices, a gate led to the kitchen-garden, at the other side of which were the hockey-field and swimming-bath. None of this could, of course, be seen from the cab, but Nancy drank in every visible detail with eager eyes.

The wide front door stood open, and Sir Roden's knock was instantly answered by a smiling maid, who conducted the travellers across the hall, and knocking at a door on the right, ushered them into a pleasant room directly overlooking the tennis-courts. The next minute Nancy was being introduced to the Principal, and the main thought in her confused brain was, to her relief, a pleasant one. "I shall like her, I know I shall. She's a dear, though I expect she is strict."

Miss Primrose was tall, with a singularly sweet voice, and a face which slightly reminded Nancy of her mother's, though Lady Haverfield's wonderful bronze hair gave place in Miss Primrose to silvery grey. She welcomed the travellers kindly, and though it was so early in the afternoon, ordered tea at once for their refreshment. She talked gaily to Nancy and plied her with a hundred questions, to which the child replied as best she could.

After the meal was over, Miss Primrose suggested a tour round the school, and herself acted as guide.

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To Nancy, the result of the inspection was ‘confusion worse confounded’ for, as she explained later, “the passages seemed a terrible tangle.” She retained a vivid impression, however, of one or two things: the airy schoolrooms, most of which were the scene of active tidying of desks and lockers by what appeared to be at least a thousand girls all exactly alike; the level playing-fields; the spotless swimming-bath; one or two of the long dormitories; the sunny studio with its casts, sketches, and easels; the gymnasium; the great laboratory; the empty recreation-rooms; and, most of all, of the dim, quiet chapel, with its dark pews, stained windows, and flower-decked altar, where a row of ruby lamps cast a soft radiance over the silent figures of St Mary and St Hilda in niches on either side, and on the bowed thorn-crowned Figure on the Rood above.

“Our chapel is only two years old,” explained Miss Primrose, as they turned away. “It **was given** to us after the war by more than five hundred old girls and their parents as a memorial to brothers and sons who made the Great Sacrifice.”

Miss Primrose led the way back to her sitting-room as she spoke, where she left father and daughter together for a few moments, to say good-bye. Nancy clung tightly to her father at the last, but bravely blinked away her tears as she kissed him.

“I’m being brave,” she explained, “because I promised Mums I would, and I’ll try to be good too.”

Sir Roden kissed her fondly. “That’s my good

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girlie. Mums will be glad when I tell her. It's only for one term, little maid; and we'll write very often. God bless you, dearie."

He kissed her again and was gone, and Nancy ran to the window to watch the cab go down the drive. And when her father waved to her from the window, she proved herself a true Haverfield, for she was able to reply with her brave happy smile.

CHAPTER III

St Hilda's

NANCY remained in the window for a few moments after the cab had disappeared, trying to suppress the desire to indulge in a genuine weep. In the end she was successful, and it was with quite a cheerful face that she turned round to examine the room at her leisure, for Miss Primrose had not returned.

The room was typical of its owner, Nancy decided, and its daintiness appealed strongly to the girl's eye for the beautiful. Attractive-looking books and pictures were there in profusion, and just now the furniture had donned its summery garb of pink and white chintz, while flowers seemed everywhere, growing plants in pots, and cut blooms in vases. Suddenly, in the midst of Nancy's observations, a voice from behind her broke the silence.

"Are you Nancy Haverfield?"

Nancy turned sharply. In the doorway stood a girl of about her own age, slim and fair, with a pleasant, slightly freckled face and blue eyes. She wore a lavender-coloured cotton frock and white shoes and stockings, and carried a tennis-racket.

"Miss Primrose saw your father off, and then she met me coming from tennis," went on the new arrival,

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" and asked me to find you and show you your room. My name is Pamela Hayman. I think you are to be in our form—the Fourth. Will you come with me?"

Nancy smiled back in friendly fashion, as she caught up her attaché-case and followed her guide. "It's dreadfully hot, isn't it?" she remarked as they crossed the hall.

Pamela held up a warning finger. "S-sh! We may not speak in the hall," she whispered.

She opened a baize door and held it for her companion to pass through. "It's all right now," she continued aloud. "This is the boot-room. If you'll wait a moment I'll put away my racket. We mayn't take them upstairs."

She opened another door and ushered Nancy into a long room lit by three skylights. Around the walls ran a row of lockers numbered from 1 to 70, underneath which ran a long umbrella-stand, each section of which was numbered to correspond with the locker above. The lockers and stands numbered 62 to 70 were labelled "Vacant." Every other stand contained an umbrella, and hockey-stick, and the majority held a cricket-bat and tennis-racket in addition.

"All our boots and sports things live here," explained Pamela, as she rummaged in locker 47 for her press. She slipped it over her racket and tightened up the screws and propped the racket up in the stand. "This is the way upstairs. Let me

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carry your case. We have to use these stairs during the week, but on Saturdays and Sundays we may use the front ones. If we look at the notice-board we shall see what room you are in."

She crossed the landing and ran her eye rapidly down a list affixed to a board, headed "Dormitory arrangements," and signed "G. L. Franklyn, House Mistress."

"Let me see, E—F—G—H, Haddon, Hammond, Hanson, Hassall, Haverfield, N. C. That's you, isn't it? Hooray! Dormitory VI. What fun! That's where I am. Come along."

She crossed a corridor, dived down another at right-angles to it and opened a door at the end.

"There! Allow me to present to you the apartment known officially as Dormitory VI, unofficially as the Blue dormitory, and popularly, from the abandoned character of its wicked inmates, as 'The Incurable Ward!' I hope you will be happy here. I need hardly say that the rest of us are. Indeed, for Incurables, we are a very resigned and cheerful lot!"

She plumped down on the nearest bed with a laugh, and Nancy laughed too, as she deposited her neat brown case on the floor and surveyed the room.

As its 'unofficial' name suggested, it was decorated throughout in blue, and the scheme was carried out even to the coverlets on the beds, and the embroidered bags for bedroom slippers hanging on the foot-rail of each. The room was a long one for its width, and was lighted entirely from one of the long sides by

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two large sash windows opening on to the balcony, and a bay window beyond them. Against the same wall, in the spaces between the windows, stood three cleverly-contrived chests of drawers, of which the tops were half a wash-stand and half a dressing-table. The six little beds were ranged along the opposite wall, and beside each was a chair and a tiny white-enamelled table. The door was at one end, and the wall at the opposite end was left entirely bare except for a large ebony and silver crucifix hanging in the centre of it.

"All the dormitories are exactly alike in every detail except colour," explained Pamela, "and each contains six girls. There are eight altogether: four on this landing and four upstairs, but these are heaps nicer. That accounts for forty-eight of us; and about a dozen of the senior girls sleep in a new set of double bedrooms over the studio. Oh, here's your luggage at last."

She jumped up as she spoke and opened the dormitory door to admit Miss Franklyn, the house-mistress, followed by a red-faced, sandy-haired man carrying Nancy's trunk high on his burly shoulders. He deposited his burden at the foot of one of the beds, in accordance with Miss Franklyn's instructions, unfastened the straps, and withdrew.

Miss Franklyn turned to the two girls with a pleasant smile. "Well, are you making friends already?" she asked. "Pamela, I hope you will look well after Nancy for a week or two. As she is your

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form-mate as well as room-mate you will be able to help her a good deal. As to Nancy, I hope she will work well and play well and be very happy. You had better unpack your trunk now, so that Jenkyn can take it to the box-room. Put it outside the door when it is empty. Pamela will tell you where to put your various belongings. Your locker will be No. 62, your wardrobe 62 also. Here are the keys. You will see that they are marked with your number. I shall be back in half an hour and shall expect to see your things unpacked and put away. This is your bed and that your dressing-table."

Miss Franklynn left the room, and Nancy and Pamela set to work with feverish haste upon the trunk, Pamela keeping up a rapid fire of instructions and comments meanwhile.

"What a dear little clock! No one has one in the Blue dorm so it can live on the mantelpiece. Hang your brush and comb-bag on the drawer-knob. You're lucky in sharing your dressing-table; you have Patty Thornton. She gets up ever so early and is always quick. I sleep here, next to you, and share with Sylvia Lambert. She takes all day to do her hair and makes me get up first. What a pretty dress! Oh, you've got your green class-dresses. Are you going to bathe and play tennis? No, don't put your dresses there; there's a special wardrobe-room on each landing; that's what your key is for. Miss Franklynn thinks wardrobes in bedrooms take up air space, or something equally

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mad. Come with me and I'll show you where to put your dresses."

She picked up two or three dresses and slipped them on to hangers, and Nancy caught up two or three more, and together they went down the corridor to the wardrobe-room, a large room surrounded by long cupboards, each well supplied with hooks. No. 62 was open and empty and the two girls soon deposited Nancy's coats and dresses on the various pegs, locked the cupboard and returned to the dormitory.

They had just finished tidying up the odds and ends and were moving the trunk on to the landing when Miss Franklynn reappeared. She looked around with an approving eye and told the girls to tidy themselves for tea.

" You had some, didn't you, Nancy, in Miss Primrose's room, but I expect you can manage to eat some more? Are these all your boots and shoes except your bedroom slippers and house shoes? Right. I will tell Bessie to fetch them and put them in your locker."

" Where are all the others who sleep here? " queried Nancy, as she brushed her hair.

Pamela stooped to recover a hair-slide.

" Not back yet. I slept here alone last night, and there were only two in the Green dorm opposite. But we kept both doors open. You came through Netherstoke, didn't you? I thought so. None of us ever come that way. We wait at Newton Abbot

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and Miss Primrose sends the wagonette twice during the day to fetch us. One batch comes during the morning and the other at tea-time. All our people happen to have longish journeys, so they have yet to come. In fact, they're due at any moment. Glory! There's the tea-bell. Where *is* my hanky? Are you ready?"

Corridors and stairs were crowded, as it seemed to Nancy, by a host of hurrying girls of all sizes and ages, among whom she herself was glad to shrink back and remain unnoticed. Pamela was welcomed on all sides by rejoicing old friends who plied her with eager questions; but she managed to secure a place for Nancy next to herself. Nancy slipped into it gratefully, and for a moment there was silence as a mistress spoke a short Latin grace. Then the clatter of tongues broke forth anew, and under cover of it Nancy was able to look about her a little.

The dining-hall was a long and lofty room panelled in light oak, having a door at one end communicating with the hall, and one at the other with the housekeeper's room and kitchens. Two long tables were placed side by side running down the length of the room; and two others, rather shorter, across it, one at either end. It was at the end of one of these latter that Pamela and Nancy had found places and thus the new girl had an excellent view over the whole room.

Her first impression was that the room was crowded to suffocation, her second that it was not,

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her third that it was beautifully airy, and indeed that one whole table was empty. She also noticed that the girls sat not upon forms but upon leather-seated oak chairs, each of which bore on its high back the carven monogram "S. H. S." A moment later she noticed that a mistress sat at the head of each table, and that in most cases she was surrounded by a select little knot of seniors, who assisted her, in an unofficial capacity, as she presided over her large, hissing, copper urn.

Pamela's voice at her elbow broke in upon her meditations.

"Will you have jam or honey? When you've helped yourself, I'll tell you who some of the people are. Look out, here's your tea coming. We're all sitting anyhow to-day, as it's first day, but afterwards we're supposed to keep to our own tables. That is the Middle School table, ours you know, near the window. This is really the Senior table; the other small one is the Kindergarten, and the Junior one is where they're all laughing so. This is Miss Coulthard at the head of the table; she's the Art Mistress, you know, and has charge of the Third Form. Every one has her special subject, of course, but each has charge of a form in a general way. Our Form Mistress is Miss Wentworth; she's not here yet. That fair girl with the sleepy face next to Miss Coulthard is Jean Lester; she's a prefect. The other prefects are Ray Barlowe and Helen Martyn, the Head girl, that's the red-haired one with her hat on,

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she's only this minute come. She's nineteen and is leaving at the end of term to go to Cambridge. Then there's Iris Phillips, the dark-haired one who's making all those babies laugh; and Winifred Selwood and Cecily Bartholomew, but they don't seem to have come yet. Oh, yes, they must have though, the Bartholomews at any rate, because there's Margery cutting the cake at the Junior table. She's in our Form you know, and an awful sport. Oh, and *do* you see that mistress at the head of the table; do you? Look, quick!"

Nancy looked. "The brown-haired one with the funny blouse, do you mean?"

Pamela flared up. "Brown-haired, indeed, it's black as the raven's wing, and her clothes are lovely, always. Wait till you know her, and then say brown-haired! Yes, that's who I mean, though. That's Miss Harrington, the Science Mistress. Isn't she lovely? She's the darling of the whole School," she finished, romantically. She sat in silence for a few moments, doubtless turning over in her mind the manifold virtues of "the darling."

Nancy had finished her piece of cake, and now sat studying the pattern on her plate, when suddenly a voice from her right made her look up.

"Pamela's stopped at last. I thought she never would, but I've been longing to speak. You're new, aren't you? I thought so. I'm so sorry for you. It's horrid being new. You must let me try to help you. If you get into any trouble hunt up Joyce

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Harwood. Life's not all roses here, but don't be afraid. I can smooth over a lot of bumps."

Nancy thanked her, demurely, but there was a note of gush in the girl's voice which she did not altogether trust. She threw a curious glance in the direction of her new friend, but Joyce immediately distracted her attention by some clever remark at the expense of poor dowdy Mademoiselle Delorme, who was being 'ragged' vigorously at a neighbouring table by a handful of rowdy Juniors. Nancy replied with an appreciative laugh, and the ice was broken. By the time tea was over, Joyce had confided to Nancy that she had "never been so taken with a new girl at first sight before," and that she was sure they were going to be friends. The new girl responded gratefully, if shyly, and the pact was just sealed as the girls rose from their places and filed out of the room.

Outside the dining-hall Pamela turned to her charge. "It's tennis next for you," she announced. "You'd better go and change. White shoes and stockings, you know, and a cotton frock. I played before tea, so I can't now. I practise for an hour, but I'll just run up to the dorm and see if I can find someone to look after you."

Nancy took a step forward. "Is—is Joyce Harwood in our dormitory? She spoke to me at tea. Couldn't I go with her?"

Pamela looked at her strangely. "Oh, she spoke to you, did she? Offered to look after you, I s'pose?"

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"Yes; she was quite kind. She's a nice girl, isn't she?"

"I don't quite know. She takes up every new girl who comes here for a day or two, and then drops them like a hot brick. But she'll take you all right, I dare say. Do you know your way to the dorm? Good. See you again at six, and I'll tell you then what happens next."

The tennis lasted an hour. Newly arrived among so many strangers, Nancy would gladly have watched rather than played, but she found she was not consulted in the matter. With a dignified "Go along, kiddy. If you've only played a little before, it's all the more reason why you should play a lot now. Don't be silly," a senior girl swept her on to the court, to sink or swim. However, the game was a mild one, and her partner, little Barbara Golding of the Second Form, happily conscious of her superior prowess, was magnanimous enough to overlook several 'faults.'

Nancy made one or two new friends on the court, but it so happened that none belonged to the 'Incurable Ward,' so she had perforce to make her way thither alone, when the bell sounded at six o'clock. On the stairs Jean Lester sought her out. It was Jean who had exercised her authority on the tennis-courts.

"You are to change your dress now; Miss Primrose will speak to the whole School in the gymnasium at half-past six."

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Nancy sped away to the boot-room, deposited her racket and shoes and hurried up to the Blue dormitory. In the doorway she nearly ran into Joyce Harwood, who was making for the wardrobe-room with an armful of dresses. Joyce smiled broadly, but the new girl's answering smile was a somewhat uncertain one. It happened that at that very moment she had been thinking of Pamela's words outside the dining-hall. "She takes up every new girl who comes here for a day or two, and then drops her like a hot brick." She wondered if they were true; at any rate it was clear that the remark had been a perfectly spontaneous one. Finally, she decided to let matters take their course, and to condemn neither girl untried.

The scene inside the dormitory was a very different one from that of the afternoon. Long blue curtains, running on rods affixed to the ceiling, had been drawn between the beds, cutting off for each girl a temporary cubicle, from most of which came the sound of voices and laughter. Nancy's eye sought anxiously for her father's photograph on one of the dressing-tables before she herself made a dive into the curtained space opposite to it. Joy! there was her own night-dress-case on the bed, and one of her neatly-folded new green class-dresses. She was glad now that she had left it there, for she had seen so many girls attired in similar frocks on her way upstairs that she concluded that this must be the required costume for this hour of the day. As she

THE THIRD FORM ROOM

untied her hair-ribbon a voice spoke from the other side of the curtain, sounding so near as to seem almost at her elbow.

"I say, does anyone know who's to take Mollie Fraser's place in the Blue dorm this term?"

A clear voice from the other end of the dormitory replied to the question.

"Yes, I know. Miss Franklynn told me. A new girl, who's been sent home from India. She came about tea-time."

A third voice, apparently somewhat muffled by vigorous hair-brushing, took up the tale.

"Oh, then I know her. Just before tea Miss Primrose asked me to look after some kid. I shook her off somehow, a bit later. Rather a muff. But she's for the Fourth, so Prim said. An only child, I gathered, and rather a brainy specimen. Ah—hem!"

The first voice spoke again, ringing with sarcasm.

"Delightful for us to have such a paragon in our Form *and* in our dorm. No escaping from it, so to speak. Wonder if we shall have to dress it and act nursemaid generally? Children are sent home from India at about eight or nine years old, I believe. It will be a remarkable experience for the Incurables to have to set a good example to the young, and for the Fourth to have scholastic rivalry with a babe of nine summers. *Most* interesting. I must look out for the curiosity. What is its name?"

The reply came from the other end of the dormitory.

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"I did know, but it's gone out of my head. 'Have something,' I think."

"'Have-a-biscuit,' perhaps," suggested the first speaker, at which there was a universal laugh.

"I should say she'd be certain to 'take the cake' herself, anyway," went on the voice, "for brains, you know, and general excellence. She'll want an awful lot of squashing, so whither I lead in that matter, you others kindly follow. It's a shame to turn the Blue dorm into a nursery and fill up the corners in Sen—in Middle School Forms with baby prigs. Rotten! I for one don't intend to be sat upon. Are you ready, you others? I vote we play some game or other till half-past."

There was a general exit from the dormitory from all the cubicles save two. Half-sitting, half-lying on her little bed, Nancy was shaking with tearless sobs. So that was Pamela, whom she had thought so friendly. ". . . I shook her off somehow, a bit later. Rather a muff." And then came a recollection of Joyce's words at tea. "You must let me try to help you . . . I can smooth over a lot of bumps." Were they all going to be like Pamela, she wondered, ready to drop her, and say behind her back that she was "a muff" and "a baby prig"? How she hated them all! How she wished she had never started school! But she would show them she did not care; she would make matters hot for them, the conceited things; she would—

A hand touched her shoulder, and Nancy rolled

THE THIRD FORM ROOM

over and sat up with a start. At her elbow stood Joyce, all caresses and sympathy.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, dear. I heard all they said. They are beasts. But don't mind them. I'll look after you, and help you to show them you don't care. You poor thing; what a greeting for you, on your very first night, too. There, don't cry. Slip on your class-dress, and I'll take you to the gym."

She slipped an arm round Nancy and helped her to her feet. Nancy submitted silently to Joyce's assistance, but a strange thought was running in her mind. "If you heard what they said, there were a hundred ways by which you could have stopped them. I believe you wanted me to hear for some reason." But she made no remark till they were out in the corridor, when she suddenly said: "Pamela seemed nice to me at tea; I'd no idea she was so anxious to 'drop' me, as she called it, or I'd have relieved her at once of my company."

Joyce coloured, and to Nancy her reply seemed hurried and somewhat confused.

"I suppose one can't always tell what other people think. Oh, there's half-past! Quick, or we shall be late."

She broke into a run down the long passage, and turned into the gymnasium, Nancy following closely at her heels. Among the chairs allotted to the Fourth Form there were but two left empty, and into these the two girls sank gratefully, for Miss Primrose had not yet arrived.

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If the dining-room had seemed to Nancy to be crowded, the gymnasium appeared packed with a vast multitude, and the babel of tongues to be deafening. Nancy felt a very small unit, appearing thus for the first time among the whole School. Here were girls of all sizes and ages, from the small girls of the Kindergarten in the front row, to the dignified Helen Martyn who was waiting at the head of the room to read the Roll-call.

Suddenly there was a hush, and the whole School rose to its feet, as the Staff, followed by Miss Primrose, entered the room and took their seats on a raised platform. A hymn was sung, and the chaplain read a short form of prayer, after which Helen Martyn read the Roll-call. Then for a few moments there was much rustling of skirts and scraping of chairs, as the School settled down. At last there was silence and Miss Primrose began to speak.

In after years Nancy often recalled parts of the speech which followed. It seemed as if the Principal —tall and stately in her hood and gown—was speaking directly to Nancy herself, uttering words of encouragement and advice.

From a general welcome she passed at length to more detailed matters.

"There are no very great changes in the School this year," she said. "We were all sorry to lose Miss Henderson last term, but we are very fortunate in her successor. Miss Henderson and Miss Windsor, whom I now introduce to you, were school

THE THIRD FORM ROOM

and college acquaintances, and I hope you will make Miss Windsor welcome and work well under her. We lost three girls at the end of last term, and in their places we welcome five new ones; two to the Kindergarten, one to the Second Form and two to the Fourth. Help them all you can to realize the aims and ideals of our School in work and play, and remember that minutes spent in helping some new girl who may be in any difficulty will in nowise lose their reward. This term will need some hard work and some hard play. I need not remind you of the various sports contests in which St Hilda's has always figured, or of the examinations in which your parents and teachers look to you to do your best. I will dwell no longer on any of this, save to give you a few lines to remember, as a cheering little thought. I am only sorry I am unable to quote the author's name. These are they, and I hope they may help you many times during the coming strenuous term:

"Take this honey for the bitterest cup,
There's no failure save in giving up.
No real fall so long as one still tries;
For seeming set-backs make the strong man wise.
There's no defeat in truth, save from within;
Unless you're beaten there, you're bound to win."

There was a rapt and attentive silence for a moment, and then Miss Primrose spoke again.

"I have now but one more announcement to make before you are dismissed. I notice at these words a thrill of excitement among you, and I think it has

ST HILDA'S

been unofficially circulated during the day that an unusual announcement was to be made. That is so, and it is one, I think, which will prove itself a treat to you as time goes on. You all know that St Hilda's has always been to the fore in science. We have been fortunate in our teachers of this subject, throughout, and we possess good equipment. For the past year Miss Harrington has very ably run a Scientific Society, in which you have dealt, on a small scale, with many things of interest: X-rays, telegraph, and telephone; and of late, I understand, you had started the study of wireless telegraphy. It is in this last study that we (I refer to the Committee of the School) are most anxious to encourage you. I dare say you all know of the 'broadcasting' system of wireless, by which concerts and lectures are sent from some central station so that they may be heard by people everywhere who have the necessary apparatus. With this in mind, the Committee has decided to install at St Hilda's, not only a receiving station, but a small transmitting one, as there are many amateurs in this district with whom you could exchange messages and signals. No! Stay a moment before you clap your approval. You owe the whole suggestion to your Science Mistress, by whom it was proposed to the Committee, and to whom you must look for help, when, in two or three weeks' time, you sit at the finished instrument to listen to a concert by performers in Paris or Holland."

Miss Primrose paused, and the next moment the

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applause broke forth in round after round of thunderous clapping. Most of the girls knew of the great possibilities of the new system of broadcasting, and all were greatly pleased by the announcement, not least among them being Nancy, who had seen something of the use and powers of wireless on her way from India. It all came to an end, at length, but not before the already much-loved Miss Harrington had been hailed with three cheers from the School, and many handshakes from the rest of the Staff. Then the girls rose and stood in their places while the Staff left the room; after which they were dismissed by Miss Franklyn, to discuss at the supper-table the wonderful news, and to make their way to bed and dream of concerts and receivers, wireless signals and telegraph messages. And thus ended Nancy's eventful first day in the new life of St Hilda's.

CHAPTER IV

Royal Mail

FROM Nancy Haverfield, St Hilda's, to Lady Haverfield, London :

*St Hilda's
May 15th*

My darling Mums and Daddy,

Thank you both so much for your ripping letters. I was so glad to get them, for I felt rather lonely just at first, and they cheered me up a good deal. This is a lovely place; I feel ever so well, and I'm quite happy, really.

I'm in the Fourth Form, but the work is rather stiff, and Miss Wentworth says I must work very hard if I don't want to go back into the Third. She says I really ought to be taking Junior Oxford this summer according to my age.

There are sixteen of us in the Fourth—one other new girl besides me, called Mollie Newberry. Our dorm is called the 'Incurable Ward,' because the people in it are supposed to be such a sinful lot. It is all blue—curtains, walls, bedspreads, and everything. There are five others in it besides me—Pamela Hayman, Joyce Harwood, Sylvia Lambert, Patty Thornton, and Daphne Heritage. Pamela Hayman was awfully nice to me on the first day, and I nearly had a most dreadful

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quarrel with her. It wasn't quite my fault, but I was a pig to her all day yesterday. On the first night the Incurables were talking about me and someone said I came from India. I was in my cubicle and I didn't try to listen, but I couldn't help hearing. Then someone else said Miss Primrose asked her to look after me before tea, but that she thought I was a muff and a baby, so she got rid of me somehow. The others were awfully mad at having to have me in the dorm. Then I cried, and Joyce Harwood came to my cubicle and kissed me and told me not to mind. I don't think I like her, though she is very kind to me. Of course I thought it was Pamela who said that about me in the dorm and I was ever so mad, and didn't speak to Pamela yesterday. This morning I heard that it was Daphne who'd said it about another new girl who is in the Second, and who she thought was me. Of course they were wild at the thought of having a kid like that in here. Anyway it wasn't Pamela who said that, for Pamela wasn't even in the dorm at the time. I knew afterward that she'd bumped her head against a shelf in the music-room, and Matron took her to the sick-room and made her lie down. She even had her supper there, and that's what made me think she felt guilty and was avoiding me. The worst part was, Joyce knew all the time it wasn't Pamela and didn't tell me. Of course I spoke to Pam last night, and told her I was sorry and she said it was all right. But I don't think it was nice of Joyce.

Miss Primrose is having a wireless apparatus put

ROYAL MAIL,

in here, for us to listen to good and instructive concerts and lectures, as she calls them. The workmen have started to put the aerials up, and we're all so excited. You know how I loved the wireless on the Ocean Queen, and how Lieutenant Maynard started to teach me the Morse Code. I'm ever so glad I started. I shall go on with it now, so that I can send and take messages. Patty Thornton is keen on it too. Last night she smuggled her umbrella up to the dorm to practise 'sending,' like you do with flags, and this morning we tapped out 'Good-morning' on the lid of my desk. They have Girl Guides here and Patty wants me to join.

I got top of the geography-class to-day. They are doing the geography of India, so I knew it fairly well. It's climate and products next lesson. And the history they're doing is about the Mutiny. Isn't it lucky?

Miss Primrose is a dear. Her eyes remind me of you, Mums, and she has a voice like yours, too.

I am writing to Aunt Mary to-night, just to tell her I am here safely. Please write to me when you have time. I expect you and Daddy are very busy, but I love to get a letter.

With tons of love and kisses to you both

From your own

NANCY

THE THIRD FORM ROOM

From Miss Mary Rivington to Nancy Haverfield,
St Hilda's :

Uplands

Crossthorpe

Lincolnshire

May 16th

My dear Niece,

My sister and I were much pleased to receive your short letter this morning, informing us that you have arrived at your new school and are feeling settled. We trust that you will do your best to make good progress in your lessons. I have also to thank you for the letter posted from London, and to say that your choice of a clock meets with my entire approval.

You ask me if I have ever seen the wax-work figures. No, my dear, I have not, for neither my sister nor I have yet been to London. I am glad to hear that you had so enjoyable a time there, and that you mingled some instructive excursions with your pleasure.

Notwithstanding its brevity, there is much in your second letter that I find interesting.

It will be strange to you to be working in a class with as many as fifteen other girls, after having a no greater number of class-mates than Mrs Spencer's three children; and a new experience to be sleeping with five others instead of alone.

But I trust you will be happy and work well.

Your Aunt Emma sends you affectionate greetings, and Parker and James desire to be remembered to you. Dan and Don are well. Deborah has made a tin of

ROYAL MAIL,

toffee for you which I send. I trust you will partake of this in wise moderation.

With my most sincere wishes,

Believe me, my dear Nancy,

Your very affectionate Aunt,

MARY RIVINGTON

From Lady Haverfield, London, to Nancy Haverfield, St Hilda's:

Harleigh M.

Andover Street, W.

May 27th

My darling Girlie,

This is to be just a short letter, dearie, to tell you Daddy and I leave to-morrow for Madeira, and to wish you 'Good-bye'! I hope you will be a good and happy little girl while we are away, and not get into mischief! If you work hard and play hard the time will soon pass.

You seem to be having a good time. I see by your latest letter that the wireless is finished; I expect you are all longing to use it.

How lovely for you all to be going that splendid picnic next week!

I can quite believe you are delighted at the chance of using your new bicycle. You are not a very practised rider, so be sure to take care. Will you cycle to the picnic?

I am writing to Miss Primrose about the music

THE THIRD FORM ROOM

examination. If Mr Copping wishes you to enter this term and thinks you are fit for it, you had better try, by all means.

How strange that your chaplain's wife should have been a school-friend of Mrs Spencer! Has Mrs Graves any children? I suppose she and Mrs Spencer have not met lately, so she cannot have seen Maisie and the boys, which reminds me, dear, I think you had better write a short letter to Maisie. She was very sad to lose you from Sandrabad, and I am sure she would like some news of you.

Your new cousin's name is Flavia. She wrote me a dear little letter a few days ago, and sent her love to you. She says she longs to have an auntie and a cousin, for she has never known any other relatives but Uncle Wilbert and Stephen.

I send your camera, as you ask me. I did not notice that you had left it here, till I got your letter.

Daddy sends you his fondest love and says he will bring Flavia to see you as soon as we come home. But you will see us all then very often, for we shall be much at Prior's Mead, even before we actually stay there. The time will soon pass, and we hope to be back in a month or six weeks, for we shall not stay long in Madeira. Remember a whole fortnight of the term is gone already. Take care of yourself and work well.

All my love to you, darling.

Ever your loving

MOTHER

ROYAL MAIL

From Nancy Haverfield, St Hilda's, to Maisie Spencer, Sandrabad, India :

*St Hilda's School
Lexfield, Devon
England
May 29th*

My dear Maisie,

I just thought you would like to hear a little about me, and what I am doing.

I think Mums told your mother in her last letter that I was going to a boarding-school. As you will see it is called St Hilda's, and is in Devonshire; we are only three miles from the sea. There are sixty girls here, and we have a lovely time.

Our head's name is Miss Primrose and our form mistress is Miss Wentworth. There are sixteen in my form, which is the Fourth. We have wireless here, but it's only just finished and has not been used yet.

Mrs Graves, our Chaplain's wife, was at school with your mother. I found it out by accident. She asked me to tell you, when I wrote, to ask your mother if she remembers 'Bunty.'

We are all going for a picnic, a week to-morrow, to Hawkland Cove. If it's fine we shall bathe.

Please give my love to Reggy and Geoffrey, and to Mr and Mrs Spencer. Tell Miss Medland that I'm in the Fourth, and have been top in geography both weeks so far.

I hope you are all well. How is the old woman who was run over in the bazaar that day? Daddy told me

THE THIRD FORM ROOM

Captain Crossley's Kitty had had a fall, and hurt her knees. I hope she didn't have to be shot. She was a dear; I should like to be riding her now.

I must stop, I have to do my practice, but I will write again soon. Please write and tell me all the news.

Lots of love and kisses from

NANCY

CHAPTER V

Black Monday

S YLVIA!"

"Yes."

"I can't find my hair-brush. Have you seen it?"

"Seen it? No, of course not. Why should I? I should think you'd better hurry up, or you'll be late for prayers. It must be nearly eight."

"I know, but I can't go down without brushing my hair. Are you sure you don't know anything about it? I'm certain I put it back in my bag last night."

"You can't have done. Anyway, I haven't got it. I have one of my own without taking yours, thank you."

"Oh, Sylvia, don't be a pig. You might help me to find it, as you're ready. Where on earth can it be? Can't you see it anywhere?"

"No, and I can't stay to help you, for there's the bell."

Sylvia left the dormitory, and Nancy continued her frenzied search for the missing brush. At the end of five minutes she felt quite convinced that the article in question had been purposely 'lifted' by someone for a joke. The knowledge did not tend to soothe Nancy's already ruffled feelings.

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"They are mean. I believe they love to torment me. They must just have done this to make me late, and get me into—— There! Of all places in the world!"

She sprang forward to recover the treasure from its precarious perch on the top of the door, and rushed back to the dressing-table.

Morning prayers at St Hilda's were read in the chapel on the tick of eight o'clock. Once the door was closed no late-comer could escape punishment, for the girls left the chapel afterward by another door, lining up for a moment between the tables in the dining-hall for Roll-call.

Nancy completed her toilet in record time and flew (there is no other word for it) downstairs. There was just a chance that Miss Primrose or Mr Graves might be late, and she might then be saved a bad mark. But as she crossed the hall hope died within her. From the dining-hall came a babel of tongues and the clatter of plates and cups. Worse than ever! They were actually at breakfast! Girls were occasionally a minute or two late, but Nancy could not remember anyone who had failed to arrive till after the meal had started. It was a terrible ordeal to enter the dining-hall, to thread her way between the tables and say "Good morning" to Miss Primrose, and to find her way back to her own place. Neither Miss Primrose nor Miss Wentworth, who as usual was in charge of the Middle School table, made any remark; but Nancy felt that

BLACK MONDAY

the evil hour was only postponed. She had not long to wait. Miss Wentworth entered the Fourth Form room at nine o'clock, and bore down upon Nancy like an avenging angel.

"Nancy Haverfield! You were late for breakfast. That means a bad mark. What was the cause of it?"

Nancy was silent for a moment, debating the advisability of disclosing the real reason.

"You were at least ten minutes late," continued Miss Wentworth. "What is the meaning of such slackness?"

"I am sorry, Miss Wentworth. I could not find my hair-brush."

Miss Wentworth frowned. "That is no excuse. It should have been put away when you used it last."

The mistress paused, and Nancy, seeing that an explanation of some kind was expected, ventured unwillingly on her timid defence.

"I did put it away, Miss Wentworth—I feel sure I did."

Poor Nancy! In her anxiety to steer between self-condemnation and the betrayal of her tormentors, she cut the rod for her own back. The latter half of her sentence proved her undoing. Miss Wentworth's hand was always heavy on those who "felt sure" they had obeyed rules.

"Nonsense. That is only another weak excuse. You may take a second bad mark for your carelessness, and another time please remember to take care

THE THIRD FORM ROOM

of your own property. You will work off your bad marks after tea, instead of playing tennis."

She swept on to her desk and took out her mark-book, while Nancy, choking down a lump in her throat, hunted out her books for the first lesson, and sat down grimly, rage in her heart and war in her eye. Her temper was by no means soothed by the sound of mutterings and smothered laughter from some of 'the others' in the back row, who had been witnesses of the encounter and among whom, Nancy noticed, there were some highly interested Incurables.

The first lesson on Monday mornings was History. Nancy, who had always taken a special interest in the history of India, had been at some pains during preparation time to learn the lesson well.

Now, however, her thoughts were in a whirl, and do as she would she could not concentrate them on the matter in hand. How bitterly she regretted the evil chance which had led her to believe ill of Pamela, and to behave badly to her on the second day of the term! Rightly or wrongly, it was to that episode that Nancy attributed her own present unpopularity among the rest of her Form. No one was openly unkind or rude to the new girl, but one and all, with the exception of gentle Pamela, and Joyce, whose attentions were as marked as ever, gave her the cold shoulder generally and sought to annoy her in many little ways. For Pamela, with her kindly ways, her sterling good sense and her innate capacity for leadership was a general favourite with the form, and to

BLACK MONDAY

see her kindness unaccountably repulsed by a new girl was more than anyone could stand. Again, the Incurables themselves had never quite recovered from the threatened invasion of their kingdom by a 'kid' and a 'muff,' and Nancy, in her desperate anxiety to show them that she was neither, had, it is to be feared, somewhat overstepped the limits of modesty and due meekness with which schoolgirl etiquette fences the new girl. Pamela had retained her attitude of disinterested friendliness to all, including Nancy; and Joyce, somewhat to Nancy's surprise, had not yet reached the 'hot brick' stage of which Pamela had spoken; but with these two exceptions it was a fact that, after three weeks of life at St Hilda's, Nancy could not point to a single girl in the Fourth Form who could be relied upon to be more than coldly civil to her. She was turning all this over in her mind and reflecting miserably on the state of splendid isolation in which she had succeeded in placing herself, when Miss Wentworth's voice broke rudely in upon her meditations.

"Nancy Haverfield! I asked you a question. Name the English General who relieved Lucknow."

Nancy made a desperate effort to collect her scattered thoughts, but Miss Wentworth was a quick speaker and the question was, as Patty Thornton afterward phrased it, "ancient history by the time Nancy woke up."

Miss Wentworth was still looking questioningly at her victim, however, and the girl blurted out the only

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vestige of the lesson that remained clear in her dazed mind.

“Cawnpore!”

For a moment there was an astonished silence and then the girls broke into a gale of laughter. Miss Wentworth silenced them sharply and continued the lesson, but Nancy was quite unable to recover her lost ground, and at the end of the period found herself with yet a third bad mark to her credit, each of which would entail a quarter of an hour spent in the deserted schoolroom, drearily translating a portion of Latin verse.

It was a whim of Miss Wentworth’s that her class should study the history and the geography of a given country at the same time. Having sounded her bell, she turned now to her geography-book and commenced to question the girls on the climate and products of British India. Nancy fixed her eyes on the teacher’s face and determined to do well or die in the attempt. The questions passed round from girl to girl with varying success.

“Margery, name the chief minerals found in India.”

“Gold, copper, saltpetre, diamonds.”

“Good. Mollie, tell me, if you please, the chief grain exports.”

“Linseed, rape-seed, rice, mustard, millet.”

“Right. Joyce, can you think of one other?”

“Wheat.”

“True. Rotha, which are the chief centres of foreign trade?”

BLACK MONDAY

"Bombay and Calcutta."

"Thank you. Nancy, from which of these do we get textiles?"

Nancy thought for a moment. She could not remember having seen a reference to textiles in the lesson. Suddenly she recollect ed that she had once heard that the word 'calico' was derived from 'Calicut.' She cleared her throat nervously.

"Calcutta."

Miss Wentworth's pencil paused in its downward progress.

"Think again."

"Calico comes from there, doesn't it, Miss Wentworth?"

"True, but Bombay carries on the bulk of the textile trade as a whole. Betty, for what is Madras famous?"

Round went the questions, and at each turn, though Nancy gave no flagrantly wrong answers she managed each time to give one that just escaped being right.

At the beginning of the last round Miss Wentworth paused for a moment.

"Nancy Haverfield! I do not wish to have to give you a fourth bad mark, since, as you know, it would mean that you would not be allowed to go to the picnic on Thursday. You can, however, do much better than you are doing to-day, and if you do not answer your next question you must take the usual punishment. Margery, name the principal forest products of India."

THE THIRD FORM ROOM

Nancy's heart thumped wildly. The questions drew nearer, and in her agitation she picked up a small blue notebook which had been issued to her the week before and began nervously to turn it over and over in her lap.

Nearer and nearer. Mollie, Joyce, and Rotha each answered a question and Miss Wentworth turned to her book once more.

"Nancy, what town is famous for brass-ware?"

Nancy could have shouted for joy. The name was on the tip of her tongue. She drew a long breath, opened her mouth to speak, stared wildly round, and was silent. The name was gone! Well as she had known it, at the last minute it had slipped her memory, as a well-known fact or name can do in a moment of tense excitement.

Miss Wentworth grew impatient.

"Come, Nancy. This is your last chance. Be quick."

Nancy looked vacantly round the room once more, and finally dropped her gaze into her lap, where lay the notebook. Miss Wentworth's pencil began to drop. The prospect of the picnic faded into the distance. Suddenly the colour flew to Nancy's face and she raised her head.

"Benares," she gasped, "a town on the Ganges."

Miss Wentworth smiled encouragingly. She was not one to cherish for long her anger with any pupil.

"Good. You have saved yourself. I will give you five marks, but another time you must do better."

BLACK MONDAY

The relief was so great that Nancy nearly collapsed. The lesson went on, and at the end Miss Wentworth left the room to get her lunch. She was usually followed by the girls in a body, bent on the same errand. Not so to-day, however. The instant the door closed Nancy's desk was surrounded.

It was Daphne Heritage who opened fire.

"Nancy Haverfield! Do you seriously think yourself entitled to those five marks? If we all kept notebooks in our laps, for reference during a lesson, I dare say we might do a bit better than we do. We might even get top for two weeks in succession. But I don't envy you your feelings. I suppose that is a foreign idea of honour."

Nancy sprang to her feet. To say that the attack had taken her by surprise would be but a poor description of her complete astonishment. She broke through the ring of girls immediately surrounding her, and faced the main body of her accusers. But her eyes were still fixed upon Daphne.

"Will you please explain yourself, Daphne Heritage?"

"Certainly. You had a notebook hidden in your lap, to which you referred for the answer to the last question—and—and possibly others."

Nancy's wrath burst forth. All her pent-up resentment at the petty annoyances of the last three weeks, and all the accumulated intense anger at the day's misadventures, all of which, as she could clearly see, were traceable to the hair-brush episode,

THE THIRD FORM ROOM

descended on the heads of her hearers in full force.

"Why, you rotten lot! If you think I care about a few paltry marks sufficiently to soil my hands in taking them, you are making a mistake. My father's daughter has not yet fallen to that, and if she ever did, it would be as the result of catching it from some of you. Yes! you may well sneak away, some of you; rotten little cowards! You are judging others by yourselves. You think that because I am a new girl you can load me with slights and annoyances till I crave your favours, but you are wrong all the way. I hate you all, and I'll never cringe to you, never! I hate you; I hate you! I wish——"

"Nancy Haverfield! What are you putting yourself into this ridiculous passion for? How dare you behave in such a disgraceful fashion? You should be ashamed of yourself. Stand still, at once. Pamela, will you have the goodness to tell me what is the matter?"

Pamela stepped forward, white to the lips. She fully realised that the present situation was the result of continued petty persecution of Nancy, and although she did not know the new girl well enough to be quite certain that her accusers were in the wrong, she determined to risk the chance of getting Nancy a severe punishment, and to tell the simple truth to the Head girl and leave her to settle the matter.

"I'm sorry, Helen. It's no one's fault, really.
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Some of the girls seemed to think that Nancy had been using notes in her geography lesson; and they spoke to her about it, and she got angry. "That's all."

"It's quite enough. Tell me the whole story, you others. Miss Primrose will have to hear about this."

She seated herself in dreadful state on the platform, and the Fourth, with frightened faces, clustered near the window. There were many in the Form who, now that the critical moment had come, would have preferred to let the matter slide, but they reckoned without their host. By dint of vigorous cross questioning the Head girl drew from her frightened hearers every detail of the story. At the end of it she turned to Nancy. Her voice sounded stern, but not angry.

"Things look black against you, Nancy. Have you anything to say?"

Nancy's jaw shut like a rat-trap.

"Nothing whatever. You are as bad as the rest. You may believe what you choose about me. I don't care."

There was a moment's horrified silence and then, from the ranks behind her, Nancy heard a low but distinct hiss. Voice after voice took it up and it grew in volume, expressing the horror and disapproval of the Form. Never before had a St Hilda's girl been rude to the Head girl. As soon would they dream of replying rudely to a mistress.

Helen, too, caught the sound, and with a peremptory gesture she commanded silence. With

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admirable calmness she turned to the angry girl before her.

"Nancy, answer me. Had you any notes in that book?"

Nancy remained obstinately silent. Helen raised her head.

"Where is the book?"

No one moved, but Pamela pointed to the floor near Nancy's desk.

"It's there. It fell off Nancy's knee when she jumped up."

"Fetch it."

All eyes were on the Head girl as she took the book and turned over the leaves. Once through—and once again; inside cover and outside all received the Head girl's keenest scrutiny. Every eye in the room was bent on the clearly written name—"N. C. Haverfield," as Helen laid it down again.

"This is quite a new book. Nothing whatever has been written in it except its owner's name. You are all mistaken and you owe Nancy an apology. Who is the oldest girl here?"

There was an instant's pause and then Sylvia Lambert stepped forward.

"We are sorry, Nancy, that we accused you wrongly. Helen has made it clear to us all that we were mistaken, and I wish to apologize on behalf of the Form. I am sorry we are not all here."

She stopped, and Helen turned at once to Nancy.

"You owe these girls an apology, as much as they

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owed you one," she began. "No lady loses her temper in the disgraceful way you did—though we all admit you had cause to be angry. It would be as well for you now to explain, if you can, how the misunderstanding arose. No one at St Hilda's is counted guilty till she is proved so, and we wish every one to make the best defence she can. I am sure you will not wilfully retain a dark cloud over your head when your name is, in fact, cleared."

The kindly tone and the appeal to reason melted Nancy's angry resolve. She stepped forward, speaking quickly and impulsively.

"I'm sorry. I was a pig—but I couldn't help it. I never know what I'm doing or saying when I get rattled. This was what helped me. It may have looked dishonest, but it wasn't meant to be. You know the question and my answer, Helen. I looked down suddenly and the name flashed into my head. If it was wrong I must be punished. My governess gave me this when I left India."

She held out her hand and the girls crowded round to look. Around the thin, brown wrist, was a curious bracelet of finely-wrought Benares ware, ornamented with a native design of birds and animals and bearing a short inscription in Hindustani.

"I looked down," explained Nancy, "and saw that. It made me remember. It means 'I was made at Benares, by Mir Khan, the brass-worker.' That's all."

Helen rose to her feet.

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"Thank you. Now let us have no more trouble. Be quick all of you, and get your lunch. You created a discreditable scene, Nancy, but this time I shall overlook it. I see nothing dishonest in your wearing this bracelet, but another time you might be a little milder in your treatment of misunderstandings such as this."

She turned to leave the room, but Nancy sprang after her, and stood in the doorway barring the Head girl's progress, her face aflame, her hand trembling. When she spoke her voice was hoarse and unsteady.

"I was rude to you, Helen. I must take my punishment. I apologize, but I must be punished all the same."

A smile flickered over the big girl's face at the sight of the small, obviously frightened delinquent doing voluntary penance in the shape of making a public apology, and asking publicly for a sentence. She laid a hand on the younger girl's shoulder. There was something in the straight glance of the eyes that appealed forcibly to the dignified Head of St Hilda's.

"All right, Nancy. As to your punishment, you may sit here for the rest of the recreation time. Some one in the Fourth may bring you your lunch to eat here."

She disappeared, followed by a band of hurrying Fourth Formers; for the bell might ring at any moment. Nancy picked up the unlucky notebook and returned to her desk, to reflect on the mildness of her punishment.

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It was characteristic of the spirit of St Hilda's that it was not necessary for the Head girl to issue any personal command to the Fourth as to the supply of their late enemy's lunch. Nancy fared delicately on cream-crackers and milk, surrounded the while by a band of interested admirers of the unlucky bracelet.

She went cheerfully to the next lesson in the hope that the episode was forgotten, but she was destined to find, later in the day, that it was not. Morning and afternoon school, tea and Prep. were alike over; Nancy's three bad marks had been honourably paid off by thirty lines of Ovid; and the girls were at large in the recreation-room, amusing themselves as they listed. Nancy, with Sylvia, Pamela, Mollie Newberry, Patty, and Margery Bartholomew, was seated at a small table near the window, playing 'Consequences.' This game had lately become a favourite with the Fourth, and was more especially so when Patty Thornton could be induced to play. That young person was endowed with more than her fair share of natural wit, and any game in which she had a hand could be relied upon to be worth playing. She was in splendid form to-night and her table enjoyed itself hugely. The players had discovered in Nancy a new fountain of fun in this line, and they were proportionately delighted. Roars of laughter rose from the table near the window, till at length Angela King, a Fourth Form girl who sat reading near by, raised her head to inquire what the joke was.

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"Just listen to this. Really, Nancy is splendid at making up 'What the world said.' "

Sylvia twisted round in her chair, seized a much crumpled paper from the window-ledge and commenced to read.

"Mademoiselle Delorme met Mr Graves in St Paul's Cathedral.

"He said to her, 'Drink, pretty creature, drink.'

"She said to him, 'How many feet has a mushroom?'

"He gave her a tin of sardines.

"She gave him a stony stare.

"The consequences were, they had nightmare.

"And the world said 'That's what comes of going to sleep in church.' "

There was a universal laugh, and Sylvia turned triumphantly to Angela.

"There! Isn't it splendid? I wrote that about St Paul's and the nightmare, and Nancy's thing fitted beautifully; 'That's what comes of going to sleep in church.' "

Angela's brow darkened. Ever since Nancy's arrival she had been jealous of the new-comer's superior brains. Like some others she had found plenty of small ways in which to annoy Nancy and had vastly enjoyed the morning's scene in the school-room, but she was a coward at heart and had been unable to listen to Nancy's fierce attack upon her opponents. She had thus been absent from the final

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vindication of Nancy's character, whence her chance to adopt her present attitude. Her lip curled scornfully as she made her reply.

"Of course. The thing is easy to understand. Nancy is sitting next you. A girl who will cheat in a lesson will do so in a game."

Nancy was on her feet in an instant, rushing blindly across the room to face her enemy. Pamela stood up to restrain her and laid a slim hand on the quivering shoulder.

"Come, don't be such an old firebrand, Nancy. She's only ragging. You needn't let——"

"I will then, I will. Let me go, Pamela! How——"
Smash!

There was silence as Nancy stood regarding the damage she had wrought, the shock of which had brought her to sudden calmness. A hasty push to her chair as she struggled to get free of Pamela's restraining hand, and the curved back of it had gone through the glass door of a bookcase, smashing a large pane. And there—oh, horrors! In the doorway stood Miss Wentworth, who had been attracted by the crash.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Wentworth. Someone made me angry, and I jumped up in a temper and pushed my chair into it."

Miss Wentworth rang the bell for a maid. "You must learn to check your temper. You will have to report this to Miss Primrose to-morrow, and apologize

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to her. Meanwhile, you will go to bed at once. Your supper will be sent to you."

It was all over in a moment. Miss Wentworth gave some instructions to the maid, who appeared in answer to her summons, and left the room, sweeping before her the wretched Nancy, who felt herself to be the most unhappy girl in all St Hilda's that night.

CHAPTER VI

A Midnight Adventure

IT was a very warm night; more like August than June. The Blue dormitory was flooded with rosy sunset light, and Nancy, having opened every window as widely as possible, drew the blue-cotton curtains of her cubicle, to shut out the light, and resolutely turned to the wall and closed her eyes. She was determined that the girls should not find her awake when they came to bed, for she desired neither 'ragging' nor sympathy. But as the sun sank and twilight fell she began to realize that sleep was going to be more easily thought about than attained. She tossed this way and that, growing hotter, and more wide-awake with every moment. Little by little she threw aside the bedclothes till she lay covered only by the sheet, as she had many times done on stifling nights in far-off India. At last the hall clock struck half-past eight, and the inhabitants of the Blue dormitory trooped up to bed. Nancy drew the sheet over her shoulder and lay with tightly-closed eyes, feigning sleep. More than once she heard the curtain-rings rattle and gathered from the whispered conversation of her room-mates that they were vastly interested in her, and were indulging in sundry peeps between the curtains, in defiance of law.

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At last, however, the most wakeful became silent, and complete stillness fell over the dormitory, and indeed over the whole of the great house. For some time Nancy tossed and turned, allowing her thoughts to circle fretfully round the accumulated unhappy events of the day, which had seemed a thoroughly ‘wrong’ one to poor Nancy “from early morn till dewy eve.”

By degrees, however, she grew calmer, and with calmness came drowsiness and finally sleep, and a strange dream.

She dreamed that, having been late for a music-lesson, she was given a bad mark by Mr Copping, who handed her over to Miss Wentworth for the customary half-hour’s Latin translation by way of punishment. Miss Wentworth, having taken her seat at her desk, discovered that her copy of Ovid was missing, and sent Nancy to get it. The next moment Nancy found herself plodding wearily along a sun-baked, dusty stretch of road which she had known well in India, and at the end of which stood her father’s bungalow. She crossed the compound, pushed open the door, and found herself in—St Paul’s Cathedral. Among the rows and rows of empty chairs was placed a table, on which was a reading-lamp and a pile of books. Seated near the table was Miss Harrington—who it may be remembered, was St Hilda’s Science mistress. Nancy pressed nearer to the table, supposing that the mistress would be giving a lesson, but to her surprise

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she was not—being, in fact, engaged in eating a large piece of cake. The girl turned away, and opening a door before her, found herself in Miss Primrose's study, where sat the Principal herself in her usual place. Though feeling guiltily that she was tale-bearing, Nancy commenced a long account of Miss Harrington's strange behaviour in the cathedral, in the midst of which the Science mistress herself appeared, and rating Nancy soundly for her interference, condemned her to go instantly to bed. Nancy, in turning to leave the room had the misfortune to drop the copy of Ovid, which fell with a loud crash. She bent quickly to recover the volume and—awoke.

It was quite dark. A single star could be seen through an opening in the curtains; below it and farther to the right, a white beam of moonlight shone coldly on the great glittering crucifix on the wall.

For a moment Nancy lay quite still, pondering on the queer jumble of ideas which had constituted her dream; for she was as yet not completely awake.

Suddenly, however, she sat up with a start, and strained her ears to listen. What was that strange and eerie noise? It seemed to come from a great distance and to grow gradually louder. Then it died tremblingly away into silence. No, there it was again; and again! A moment more of silence and then it rose again on the night air; a dismal wail, as of someone or something in great distress. Ah! what a long and terrible cry! There was something

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weird and unearthly in its plaintive note. What could it be? Nancy put aside the bedclothes and felt for her bedroom slippers. A moment later she had silently parted the curtains of her cubicle and was standing before one of the widely-opened windows—a slim figure in her long white nightgown—straining her eyes over the moonlit garden. For a few moments all was quiet, and then, just as Nancy was beginning to think that the sound must have been the cry of some night-bird, which had passed out of hearing, it sounded again, louder and nearer as it seemed. Nancy shivered slightly, but it was at the strange uncanniness of the sound, and not with cold, for the night was a stiflingly hot one. She was not by nature excessively timid, but there was something unnerving in the nature of this strange, only half-human sound, and she started violently when a dim white figure appeared at the other end of the dormitory gliding slowly toward her. For a moment Nancy meditated flight, but a second later the figure spoke, and at the same time moved forward into the moonlight.

“Nancy, whatever is it? Have you heard it too?”

“Daphne, is it you?”

“Yes, I heard that awful noise; it woke me up. What on earth could it have been? I do hope it has stopped. No, there it is again.”

Nancy’s reply was scarcely audible. “It’s like a—something not human.”

Daphne shuddered in sympathy. “It is. I won-

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der if anyone else hears it. I've heard it for more than half an hour. Are you game to come with me and explore?"

"Where?"

"Downstairs. We might see something from one of the windows. It must be some—some real thing, and it's evidently out of doors whatever it is. It can't hurt us. Do come! I will if you will."

Nancy unhooked her dressing-gown. Now that her companion had proposed a definite plan of action her fear had dropped off her like a cloak, and she was ready to ransack the great house from garret to cellar in order to solve the mystery of that strange noise.

Gently and with silent steps the pair crept down the length of the dormitory and gained the corridor outside. Daphne, who seemed by tacit consent to have assumed command of the expedition, closed the door carefully and turned to her lieutenant.

"I propose we go down the back stairs," she whispered, "and then work right across the ground floor from Miss Primrose's room to the Form rooms. We are sure to find some clue or other. Do you hear the noise now?"

"No, it seems to have stopped for a minute. How silent everything seems!"

Hand in hand the two investigators stole down the stairs, and with noiseless steps commenced a thorough search of the ground floor. Miss Primrose's sitting-room door was wide open and the room itself was

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flooded with moonlight. The pair made their way to the window and peered out over the garden. As they did so the strange sound was repeated.

Nancy moved away from the window. "It sounds farther away. It must be on the other side of the house. Let's do the Form rooms. What's that? I knocked something over, I believe."

"I thought so too. It seemed as if it rolled away. Get down on your knees and feel about. It may be right under the table somewhere. Here, let me help."

But time was precious and after a hasty search under the table, Nancy came to the conclusion that she must have fancied she had knocked something down, and the two girls left the room.

The hall, lighted only by the fanlight above the front door, and by a large window on the stairs, was in comparative darkness, and Nancy and her companion gained the Third Form room with some relief. Nancy opened the window softly, and at the same instant the sound rose again, this time sounding much nearer.

Nancy leant farther out of the window. "What on earth can it be? It's a most pitiful sound whatever it is. It seems like something in pain. I wonder where it comes from."

Daphne laughed softly. "I know! Why ever didn't I think of it before? At least I know *what* it is, and now I know that I'm going out in the garden to find *where* it is."

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"Oh, Daphne, what? What is it?"

"It's Roger; the poor old thing is shut up somewhere and crying to be let out, and put back in his kennel. Are you coming?"

"We—shan't we get into trouble?"

"Bless you, no, my child, because we shan't be caught. We might as well stop Roger's noise, having got this far. He can't be far away. If you can sleep through this noise I can't."

She opened the window wider and swung her legs over the low sill, and Nancy followed suit. Together they crossed the lawn and plunged into the shrubbery beyond. It was darker here and the two girls paused for a moment, listening for the sound to be repeated. When it came again Nancy moved forward and squeezed between two laurel bushes growing near to the boundary fence. Daphne pressed after her eagerly and stood looking over her companion's shoulder with surprised eyes.

"Roger! Why, what's the matter? He isn't tied up at all."

But Nancy was down on her knees by Roger's side, and now held out a warning hand to her companion.

"Keep back. It's barbed wire; all in a tangle. Roger's got one leg in a tight loop of it. If you could hold that branch back, I could see much better. Be careful you don't run into the rest of the wire."

"Oh, poor old thing! He's bleeding. Hush, old

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chap, don't kick so. I didn't know there was any barbed wire about, did you?"

"Yes, I heard Jenkyn telling Bessie and Alice that part of the fence had broken down, and that he would have to put up some wire-netting, just for a time till he could make new posts. There you are, old chap. Now let me lift you out where there's more room and I'll look at your poor foot. Keep him still a minute, Daphne."

"No, let me have him. I'll carry him on to the lawn. I say, how wet the grass is!"

"Yes, my dressing-gown is quite damp. Put him here where it's light. That's it. Oh, look! How he must have struggled! He's torn the skin right through! What shall we do? Hadn't we better call someone?"

Daphne examined the injured paw critically.

"Oh, it's nothing alarming," she pronounced at length. "If only we had a bit of rag. I wonder if I dare tear a bit off my nighty."

Nancy drew forward the end of her pigtail, which was loosely tied with a strip of white linen. "Would this do? It's fairly long."

"Oh, goody! Hand it over. Or wait! Couldn't we make it wet somehow? Surely the grass is dewy enough. That's it; now move to a fresh place. Don't make it all wet; it will keep cleaner if the outside is dry. Now twist it round and split up the end a little way. Good. Poor old Roger! Now you'll have to cuddle up in your kennel and snooze off to

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sleep, and stop frightening respectable folks out of their slumbers. Come along; in you go! Shall I chain him up, do you think?"

Nancy turned.

"Yes, I think I should. He might get into mischief again. Do hurry up. I'm so afraid someone may see us."

"Oh, bother! I can't feel the chain anywhere. I shall have to leave it. I say, look at that! Surely you left the Third Form window *open*, didn't you?"

Nancy paled.

"Yes, I know I did! And now it's shut! Oh, what shall we do? I daren't go in! Someone must have missed us."

"Wait a minute. It's all dark. No one may be about even now. The wind may have blown the window to. And if it's shut it's no good talking about 'not daring to go in,' for you won't be able to. Let me try and—Oh! Nancy! Look! look!"

She broke off and clutched her companion's arm, pointing with a shaking finger to the flower-bed below the now forgotten window of the Third Form room. Nancy followed the direction of her friend's finger, and an instant later her heart almost stopped beating. With trembling limbs she stepped nearer, and stood looking down at the flower-bed. Close under the low window-sill grew a row of bushy marguerites planted close together and well covered with leaves and flowers. In front of these grew scarlet geraniums, and an edging of lobelia. From

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behind the marguerites came an uncanny, diffused glow of white light, steady and unflickering. It illuminated some of the nearer plants, and cast a pale gleam on the terrified faces of the two girls. Nancy tried vainly to speak, but terror seemed to have choked her throat so that no words would come.

Suddenly Daphne spoke again in an almost inaudible rattling whisper.

“Is the house on fire?”

Nancy sprang forward, galvanized into action by the dread possibility conjured up in her mind by the question. With shaking hands she pulled aside the marguerites, permitting a stronger beam of light to fall on her face. Daphne, recovering slightly from her fright, pressed forward to look. For a moment neither spoke.

“It’s a window,” gasped Nancy at last. “And there must be someone there. What can it be?”

Daphne craned her neck to peer down.

“It’s the cellars,” she announced at length. “They run right under the house. These little windows go all round the house and are to let in air. It’s not a fire; someone’s down there, with a light.”

Nancy nodded. “Yes. It’s much too steady for a fire. I wish I could see who it is. It looks very weird, doesn’t it?”

She stepped back on to the path and stood upright in the darkness, behind Daphne, still keeping her eyes on the mysterious light. After a moment her companion spoke again.

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"I say, suppose it should be burglars! There's plenty of stuff they might come for—the house-silver in the dining-hall and the sports cups in the gym. Oh! and there's some lovely plate belonging to the chapel, but I don't know where that's kept. Nancy, do you think it is burglars?"

Her voice trailed away in a frightened whisper, and Nancy's answering chuckle, low though it was, came in sharp contrast to the awestruck question.

"No! I don't think so! They'd hardly be daring enough to light the whole cellar up like that. They'd be asking for trouble."

"What do you think it is, then?"

"Someone in the house, most likely, up to mischief of some kind. One of the maids, perhaps, or some silly Third Form kids. This cellar is just under their Form room. I'm going to have another peep through the window."

She dropped on her knees as she spoke and peered between the leaves at the little window. Daphne stood silently watching for some moments.

"Can you see anything?" she queried at length.

"Nothing much. The light's rather far back. There's a table and someone standing by it, dressed in a long whity dress of some kind. There's no one else there, and it isn't one of the girls. I guess we'd better tell Miss Primrose to-morrow."

She scrambled to her feet to find Daphne regarding her with a mixture of scorn and horror.

"You crank!" she exclaimed at length. "Why,

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we'd get ourselves expelled like a shot for being out here in the middle of the night."

Nancy paled.

"W—What? Expelled? How—how awful! Oh, do come in—at once! I'd no idea. Why—I never thought—we might get caught at any minute and I—Oh, do come, quick, quick!"

She started toward the window, pulling Daphne by the sleeve, and Daphne, bewildered by her companion's sudden change of front, could only follow passively.

With a shaking hand Nancy tried the handle of the long window—once, twice—three times—and in vain. The two adventurers were locked out, to pass the remainder of the night in the garden, clad only in dressing-gowns, and to face the wrath of the Headmistress when their expedition was discovered, as it must certainly be, early in the morning. The discovery seemed to hit Nancy like an actual blow. With a little, inarticulate cry, she sank down upon the steps and covered her face with her hands. Daphne looked round helplessly.

"Listen," she said at length, "we just can't be left out here. There'd be an unholy fuss if we were found. I'm going right round the house to see if I can find a stray window left open."

She sped away in the darkness and Nancy was left alone.

How chill and weird the garden seemed now that the fear of detection had descended upon the adven-

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ture like a black and threatening cloud! Nancy shivered slightly as she gazed at the tall silent pine-trees in the drive. She began to wish now that she had gone the round of the house with Daphne. It would have been quite useless, of course, but it would have been something to think about. How awful this was! Why! oh, why! had she been foolish enough to break a rule so important as this, and to allow herself to commit wrongdoing serious enough to merit expulsion. Expulsion! for her father's only daughter. Why, he would never forgive her, she was sure. And dear, darling Mums, away in Madeira, what would she say, and worse still, what would she think? A few short weeks indeed had Nancy been at St Hilda's, yet in that short space of time she had contrived to place herself thoroughly out of conceit with the other girls throughout the school, and now, to-day had come that unpleasant affair of the broken pane of glass, with its resulting apology awaiting her on the morrow—an affair which could certainly not predispose Miss Primrose more favourably toward her—and on top of it all—this! So much—or so little—for all her good resolutions, and all her promises to her mother. She would be expelled and would have nowhere to go in all England, save to Uplands, if her aunts would receive her, which was doubtful, and then, when her parents were happily settled at Prior's Mead, she would have to be packed off to school elsewhere. And all this for the sake of one

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night's mad adventure. Oh! it was unbearable; it was——

“Nancy!”

She raised her head, and glanced dolefully toward the returning figure of her companion.

Daphne strode up with a determined step.

“Listen! I can't find a single window open anywhere, so there's only one thing for it. Will you change slippers with me? My soles are leather and I want felt ones. I'm going up over the botany greenhouse, and into the Green dormitory. Then I'll creep down and let you in through this window.”

Nancy gasped.

“Why, you can't! You'll never do it! You'd go through the glass, and if you didn't, you'd wake someone getting in and——”

“Shut up! I tell you it's the only way. Will you give me your slippers or must I go up in bare feet? I've no particular desire to stay here all night, and put my head into a noose to-morrow, if you have.”

Nancy made no further demur, but quickly slipped off her blue felt bedroom slippers and donned those proffered by Daphne. This done, she followed her companion to the small botany greenhouse, a lean-to building at the back of the house immediately beneath the windows of the Green or Junior dormitory.

Daphne was one of Miss Windsor's star pupils in

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the Gymnasium, and as Nancy hurried up she was already swarming rapidly and skilfully up the water-pipe at the end of the greenhouse. At the top she paused for a moment.

"As soon as I'm gone through the window, go back and wait for me to let you in. I shan't be long creeping downstairs, unless anyone wakes up, when I should have to go back to our dorm, but I'd come for you as soon as it got quiet again. Don't make a sound yourself, whatever you may hear inside, unless I call to you."

"No, all right. Do be careful."

"I'm safe as nuts. Don't speak to me any more."

She set her teeth, and lowering herself gently on to her hands and knees began her perilous journey. Fortunately, the greenhouse was in good repair, and the light sufficiently strong for the daring voyager to see clearly where the slender wooden rafters afforded her a narrow pathway across the slippery and treacherous expanse of glass. Nancy, watching her from the pathway, drew a deep breath of relief as she at last reached the window and, with a reassuring wave of the hand to the silent figure below, disappeared like a shadowy ghost over the sill. For a moment Nancy stood gazing at the black square of window that had swallowed her up and then turned and made her way back to the window of the Third Form room. For what seemed an eternity she waited there in silence, till at length she began to fear that some untoward accident had delayed the

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coming of her deliverer. At last came a faint click at her elbow, and the long glass door swung open. Three seconds later the two stood within the shelter of the Third Form room.

For an instant both were silent, and then, in the sharp reaction from the anxiety and suspense of the last half-hour, Nancy burst into quick sobbing speech.

"Daphne, promise—promise me you'll never tell, not a single soul, about to-night. I don't know what I should do! Please, please promise; on your honour!"

"Hush, how silly you are! You're talking quite loudly. If you aren't careful you'll wake someone. Come along up to bed. This way; close to the wall."

"No. You must promise first. Promise on your honour that you'll never tell that we were out to-night. I won't go unless you do."

"All right, I promise. I'm not likely to want it known any more than you."

"On your honour?"

"Yes, of course. Now come along. Don't crash into that desk. Here are the stairs. First there are nine steps and then eleven."

"How on earth do you know?"

"I counted them, coming down. I thought it might be useful. Don't make a noise getting into bed. Good night."

Nancy snuggled gratefully into bed. Although

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the night was so warm, she was now glad of the warmth afforded by all the bed-clothes. She heaved a sigh of relief as she lay down. What joy to be safely back in bed, after all the suspense! All would be right, now; for to-morrow she would apologize to Miss Primrose for breaking the bookcase door—and as to the midnight adventure, Daphne had faithfully promised not to tell, so all would be well. So thinking, she fell asleep.

Alas! how little we know of what a new day may bring forth!

CHAPTER VII

Facing the Music

MAY I speak to you for a moment, Miss Primrose?"

"Certainly, dear. I am on my way to the office. If you will go there I will follow you in a moment."

Nancy crossed the hall and tapped at the half-opened door of the secretary's office. Receiving no answer she pushed open the door, and entering, crossed to the window to await Miss Primrose. The office, like the other ground-floor rooms at St Hilda's, possessed a long French window, which now stood open, and looking out, Nancy could see Miss Jevons, the school Secretary, taking an early-morning stroll in the garden while waiting for the breakfast bell. In his basket by the fireplace slumbered Punch, Miss Jevons' fox-terrier puppy—a great favourite with all St Hilda's, from Miss Primrose to the smallest child in the Kindergarten. But Nancy had no heart for playing with Punch now, for the thought of the unpleasant interview to be gone through with Miss Primrose filled her mind as she stood stiffly and silently near the window.

Suddenly there was a step behind her and Miss Primrose's pleasant voice broke in upon her thoughts.

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" Well, Nancy ; isn't this a lovely morning ? A day like this makes me feel glad to be alive."

Nancy turned sharply and tried to speak, but the words would not pass her dry lips. Miss Primrose moved to the table and seating herself in the secretary's chair, drew Nancy gently toward her.

" Come, tell me what is the matter, little woman. You look quite worried."

Moved as she was by the kindly tones, yet something within Nancy's mind held her back. Somehow she felt that until she had confessed her misdoing of the previous day, and received forgiveness, the friendly touch of the Principal's hand on her arm would feel to her more like a blow than a caress, and as if received under false pretences. Yet, curiously enough, she felt no such conviction with regard to the as yet undiscovered events of the night.

Suddenly she found words.

" Miss Primrose, I've come to report myself to you, and to apologize for smashing a pane of glass in the Sixth Form bookcase—one of the big panes."

She paused and twisted her hands together nervously, her eyes turned miserably upon the floor behind Miss Primrose's chair. Possibly this was why she missed the ghost of a smile which flickered over the Principal's face at the sound of Nancy's last words.

" She is transparently honest, at any rate," was the thought that flashed through her mind, and for a moment her heart softened toward the delinquent

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before her. But her face was quite grave and stern when the small girl sought her gaze once more.

"I'm truly sorry, Miss Primrose. I wouldn't have done it for anything, indeed I wouldn't."

Miss Primrose removed her hand from Nancy's arm.

"I, too, am sorry," she replied, "for your sake as well as for my own; as you will of course have to pay for a new pane out of your pocket-money. But you need not look so frightened, my child. Of course you must be more careful another time, but anyone is liable to meet with an accident of this kind. It is not a crime."

Nancy coloured and hung her head still lower now.

"That—that's just it, Miss Primrose. It wasn't an accident. At least I didn't do it on purpose, of course. But I don't think you could call it an accident. I—I got into a dreadful temper, and I jumped up and pushed my chair into the glass. If I hadn't been so angry I shouldn't have pushed so hard and it wouldn't have happened."

It was over. The worst was out, and Nancy stood waiting for the vials of the Principal's wrath to be poured out upon her.

But Miss Primrose only said:

"What was it that made you angry?"

"We were playing 'Consequences,' and someone said that I——"

"Yes. Go on."

"I would rather not say, Miss Primrose. I got in

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a temper, that's all; and then I smashed the glass and I've come to apologize."

She stopped short, and the hard angry look appeared on her face, which had been there the day before when she had refused to answer the Head girl. But Miss Primrose was wise in dealing with girls, big and little. She knew when to be stern and when to be gentle and how to give forth the mild utterance which "turneth away wrath." She knew how to speak now to the angry girl before her, and Nancy long remembered some of the kindly words the Principal spoke to her on that day. Under their softening influence the hard and angry mood melted away, bearing with it all feelings of resentment toward Angela.

"I think, dear," Miss Primrose concluded, "that you are sometimes a little too hasty in your judgment of anyone who does not quite think of you exactly what you wish them to think; and you at once refuse to attempt to justify yourself even when you might quite rightly do so. The result of such obstinate refusal to clear yourself is that people think still worse of you, and it is then that you get, as you express it, 'into a temper.' And now, we must go, as I hear the prayer bell. Work hard, and play hard, and try to see the good in everyone, and to apply to them 'the greatest of all tolerance, which is God's.' If you succeed in doing that we shall hear no more of tempers."

Nancy fled joyfully across the hall and took her

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place in the chapel, but hard as she tried to keep her thoughts fixed on the chaplain's words, she could not help wondering, just once, if Miss Primrose had known of the bracelet episode of the day before. Her words about "refusing to justify oneself" seemed so strangely appropriate.

But Nancy need not have wondered, for no word of the episode had reached the Principal; for it was Miss Primrose's desire to judge her girls as far as possible in the light of her own experience of them and not from report. Indeed, it was characteristic of her method of ruling St Hilda's that Miss Wentworth did not again refer to the matter, not thinking it necessary to ask Nancy if she had reported herself according to orders, and that no inquiry was ever made as to the number of panes broken, Nancy's statement "one of the large panes" being taken as word and bond.

During the first lesson period that morning Nancy was sent for by Mr Copping, to receive an extra music lesson, as was the music master's custom when certain of his pupils were drawing near to an examination. It was past ten o'clock when she returned to her Form, and the girls had just started the writing of a composition. Despite the fact that the whole Form was busy on her entrance, Nancy was immediately struck by a strange feeling of tension in the atmosphere. Miss Wentworth looked stern, and the girls puzzled and uneasy. After a few moments she noticed that Daphne was making vigorous attempts

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to telegraph a message to her, but after vain endeavours to comprehend the many and various signs transmitted, she gave what attention she could to the essay she was writing, and, that finished, devoted herself to watching the clock and wondering how soon the lesson would be over, and the strange feeling of unrest explained. At length Miss Wentworth touched her bell, and before the sound had died away the girls were streaming to the door, *en route* for the lunch-room. Daphne, however, made a bee-line over chairs and desks and grabbing Nancy by the arm pulled her unceremoniously across the room and out into the garden.

"What do you think? Prim's been in!"

"Miss Primrose? To our Form? Whatever for?"

"You may well ask. You'll never guess. She was in an awful rage. It seems she went to her sitting-room after breakfast and found a freshly-made stain of ink all across the arm and seat of her big chair; and the half-empty bottle lying on the floor under the table."

She paused as if expecting Nancy to make some reply to this astounding piece of information, but the girl only stared unseeingly on the ground before her.

"Of course Prim raved about it. Apparently she had visitors there till late last night and knew the room was all right when she left, and she was the first to go there this morning. She asked us all, as a Form I mean, if we knew anything about it, and I

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quaked in my shoes for fear she'd ask each separately. I felt bad enough as it was, keeping quiet, but of course we'll have to go and tell her now."

"Go and tell Miss Primrose?"

"Yes, of course. That wretched old ink-pot must have been what you knocked down last night. Anyway Prim is mad about it, and is determined to find out who is responsible. It was horrid, as I say, not to be able to tell her what I knew when she asked, but in a way I was glad you'd made me promise not to speak, because it would have been telling tales on you. Anyway I'm equally to blame with you, so I vote we go together. We shall just have time before the bell goes, if we—what's the matter?"

Nancy stood stock still. When she spoke her voice was low and hoarse.

"A promise is a promise, and you swore faithfully you'd not tell. If you go to Miss Primrose now, you'll be breaking your word."

"But, Nancy, you surely didn't mean we were not to tell if we were asked. Surely you will release me from my promise now it has got this far."

"Well, I won't," was the determined reply. "We have not been asked yet at any rate. I intend to lie low about it, and as for you, you've your promise to keep."

Daphne sighed.

"Oh, Nancy, how funny you are sometimes! One day you don't seem afraid of anything, and another day you're quite——"

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She stopped, appalled by the sight of the fiery rage she had aroused in Nancy. The girl stood in the path barring her way, her hands clenched, her eyes blazing.

"You traitor!" she spluttered at length. "You promised to stand by me, and now you're going back on your word. You'll get me expelled, and I've nowhere to go in all England. I hate you—you—"

"Easy there, you new kiddy! How peppery you are! Your temper is too big for your size. I don't suppose a scrap like you has done anything worth all that excitement. Go to your classroom at once, and don't create such scenes about nothing, or you'll get more bad marks than you can work off, if you live long enough. There's your class bell."

And Ray Barlowe, who had come upon the pair while strolling arm-in-arm with Jean Lester, her fellow-prefect, swept the two disturbing juniors from her path and passed on.

For a moment the two prefects paced the path in silence, and then suddenly Ray broke out.

"What do you suppose all that was about? I've got an idea that it may have had some connexion with this ink-stain episode. Did you hear what she said? 'You'll get me expelled,' or something like that."

"Yes," Jean frowned slightly. "And she called the other child a traitor." She raised her head suddenly. "I wouldn't bother about it," she counselled, sagely. "If those babies have something on their minds they'll soon confess it."

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Meanwhile, in the Fourth Form, the morning drew wearily to a close. A feeling of uneasiness reigned everywhere, for the girls, big and small, felt convinced, in some strange way, that they had by no means heard the last of Miss Primrose's unfortunate discovery.

In the Blue dormitory, while preparing for dinner, some of the Incurables discussed the situation vigorously, so vigorously in fact, that they failed to miss the voices of two of their number from the discussion. Presently, still reviewing the matter from all points, Sylvia and Joyce departed for a stroll round the garden, to be followed in a very few moments by Patty and Pamela. Nancy heaved a sigh of relief as the door closed behind her room-mates, leaving the dormitory in silence. But the respite was destined to be of short duration, for suddenly the curtains of Nancy's cubicle were parted violently, and there in the opening, in defiance of all rules, stood Daphne, straight and slim in her green class-dress. In one hand she held her dainty pink dressing-gown, its otherwise spotless surface disfigured by a long straggling stain of ink, running down more than half the length of the front. Daphne pointed to the dark stain with a shaking hand.

"Look here! It's bound to be found out. What are you going to do? We shall have to tell! I'd no idea this had happened. What clumsy creatures we were!"

Nancy tugged furiously at a button, and then suddenly faced her companion.

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"What a clumsy creature I was, I suppose you mean. Anyway you needn't think it necessary to tell in order to make sure of getting a new dressing-gown. I'll get you one straight away, and when I make a promise I keep it, so you needn't worry."

"Oh, Nancy, as if I minded about the old dressing-gown. That part of it was quite an accident. It's the beastly feeling I mind of not owning up, and you know they're sure to find out in the end, though it may not be for days, or even weeks to come. I do wish you'd come with me and tell, or release me from my promise and let me tell it all, if you'd rather not."

"I suppose you'd like that most of all. I told you just now I'm not going to tell, so that's an end of it. And now please go out of my cubicle, or, as you seem so fond of tale-bearing, go and tell Miss Franklyn that you ought to have a bad mark for being here."

Hurt and angry, Daphne turned away, leaving Nancy to make her solitary way to the dining-hall.

The meal itself passed off quietly enough, for with a mistress at the end of each table, further discussion of the unhappy affair was impossible. In spite of this, however, it was clear that uneasy thoughts filled every mind, and that the flow of conversation on other subjects was fitful and at times by no means whole-hearted.

In the Form room before afternoon preparation Nancy, desiring as little converse as possible with the rest of the Form, set to work vigorously to tidy out

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her desk, keeping her head bent and shuffling her books busily. A yard or two away, leaning miserably against an empty desk, her fingers playing idly with the blind cord, stood Daphne, alone and unhappy. Suddenly the Form room door opened to admit Nora Golding, a Third Form girl, and an elder sister of the Barbara with whom Nancy had played her first game of tennis at St Hilda's.

Striding across the room toward the window, Nora took up her position in front of Daphne, and opened fire without ceremony.

"Do you know that Miss Primrose is going to ask the whole school once again this afternoon about the ink-stain on her chair?"

Daphne flushed slightly.

"Well, what about it?" she queried.

"What about it? I expect that's what you know a good deal better than I do. All I know is that you woke me up in the small hours of the morning by climbing in at the window of the Green dormitory. Of course that may," she paused, significantly, "have no connexion with the ink-stain, but at any rate it's rather an unusual occurrence. Some of us in the Third have our own ideas about the matter, and I just came to warn you that to remain under a cloud for the sake of you and your party is not in our programme. So that's that, and you can do what you like about it."

She turned on her heel and was gone, without waiting to say or hear more. For a moment Daphne

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stood as if stunned and then suddenly she swung round on Nancy.

"Did you hear that?" she demanded.

"Yes, I am sorry, I did," replied Nancy with exaggerated politeness. "I couldn't very well help hearing, though of course it was no affair of mine," she ended, meaningly.

At this point, fortunately for the peace of the Form, Miss Wentworth arrived, and for a time nothing was heard but a busy seeking of books and setting to work, followed by comparative silence, broken only by the scratching of pens, and the occasional turning of a page.

The peace, however, was short-lived. Within ten minutes there came a tap at the door and Iris Phillips, a prefect, appeared with a message for Miss Wentworth.

"Miss Primrose wishes to speak to the whole school in the gymnasium at once."

Miss Primrose was awaiting the School in the gymnasium and as the Sixth Form filed into its place in the back row she turned to the Classical Mistress, who sat near her.

"Miss Denstone, is every member of the Sixth present?"

"Yes, every one."

"Miss Harrington, have you all the Fifth?"

"Yes, Miss Primrose."

"Miss Wentworth, is your Form complete?"

"Quite."

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“ And the Third, Miss Coulthard?”

“ They are all here.”

“ Miss Windsor, your Form is a big one. Is every Second Form girl here?”

“ Yes, Miss Primrose.”

“ Miss Christopher, is anyone missing from the First Form?”

“ No, no one.”

“ Very good. Take your seats, all.”

There was a sound of scraping chairs as the School settled down in their places, followed by the customary, “ Silence there, attention all!” from the Head girl.

Then amid a silence that was awe-inspiring in its completeness the Principal moved forward.

“ Most of you must be aware of my reason for calling you together,” she began. “ As early as possible I made a round of the Form rooms during this morning, but since many of you must have been absent at that hour, and since I wish there to be no excuse for error on anyone’s part, I will make myself quite clear once more. Some time during the past night, I may say between midnight and 8.30 this morning, someone entered my sitting-room—someone who certainly had no right there. Who this was, and for what reason she entered my room I certainly do not know, but she left trace of her presence in the shape of a large ink-stain on one of the chairs, a stain which I know quite well was not there when I left my room last night shortly before midnight, and which was

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quite fresh and damp when I discovered it this morning. On the floor lay the nearly empty bottle which had been clearly overturned by the intruder. This morning, as I say, I visited all the Form rooms, requesting any girl who knew anything of this matter to confess her share in it at once, and as you know, I could get no satisfaction. The blame for this unhappy affair accordingly rests on the whole School, and I am sure there is not a girl here who would wish the pleasure of Thursday's long-looked-for picnic to be overshadowed in this way. I wish every girl in the School to have a fair chance of removing the blame from her friends, if conscience prompts her to do so, and I now ask each and all of you: Do you, any of you, know how the bottle of ink in my room came to be overturned?"

The Principal paused, waiting for the answer that did not come. Silence, deeper and more deep, hung over the assembled School. Miss Primrose's face grew sterner.

"Come, girls, I am waiting for the answer to my question. There are sixty-three girls in this room, and over sixty-two of those an unjust accusation is hanging. I am waiting for the sixty-third girl to speak the word which will place the blame where blame is due." Still silence. It seemed hours before Miss Primrose spoke again.

"I am disappointed in you all. I say 'all,' because I cannot lay this charge to the door of any one girl. I am loath to believe that there is one girl here who

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will allow the whole school to suffer for her mis-doing, yet if she refuses to own to her fault, the whole School must certainly be punished. I give you all one more chance. Was any girl in my room last night?"

Once more the Principal paused, once more to be met with that awful silence. To Nancy the silence seemed so deep that she felt sure her neighbours must hear the frightened thumping of her heart. How mean she felt! yet how awful to confess and be expelled before Mother returned from Madeira. Oh! She couldn't! she couldn't! She must try not to care about feeling mean! Anything was better than being turned out into the street. But it was hateful! Hateful! Nothing could—

Miss Primrose had moved one foot slightly, a little impatient movement which recalled Nancy to consciousness of the present. Most of all she was conscious that several pairs of eyes were bent upon her—Daphne's full of reproach, Ray Barlowe's of puzzled wonder, Nora Golding's of anger, Pamela's of gentle pity, and Angela's and Joyce's of ill-concealed triumph. Her heart almost stood still. Could Daphne have told?

But no, discovery was not yet. Miss Primrose was speaking again, in stern tones.

"I am to conclude, then, that the culprit refuses to answer me. You have arranged a picnic for the day after to-morrow." A thrill of apprehension ran through her hearers "I should be sorry to put that

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picnic off, as a postponement would cause considerable inconvenience, the arrangements with the livery-stable and the caterers having been completed. The picnic will, therefore, take place as arranged, though I fear a blight will have fallen upon its enjoyment. I shall have more to say on this matter later. Dismiss, all!"

It was over, and in spite of those hostile eyes, Nancy's confession was unmade. As she fled back to her Form room, she happened to pass close to two of the Fifth Form girls who were discussing Miss Primrose's words. It was perhaps the worst thing that could have happened to Nancy just then.

"It's a rotten thing," Rose Meyer was saying, "but I don't think Prim would ever punish the whole school for one girl, do you?"

Her companion, Priscilla Forrest, shook her head decidedly. "No, I'm certain she wouldn't. I expect it was said as an inducement to the culprit to confess."

From which statement Nancy drew a crumb of comfort and plunged into her work with renewed energy to drive away wretched thoughts. At the end of the afternoon she crossed the Form room to Joyce's desk, having arranged to play tennis with the latter that evening. Joyce surveyed her for a moment in silence, then said: "I shall not be playing tennis with you this evening. I may as well tell you at once that you are in Coventry. Practically the whole School knows that you were, at any rate, out of your room last night. You should be more quiet

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in your movements in the dormitory," she added meaningfully.

Nancy moved away sick at heart, and made her way to the dormitory.

It was only too true. Not a soul spoke to her, here or in the dining-hall. If ever anyone was "alone in the midst of a crowd" it was Nancy on that day. So the weary evening wore away, Nancy sitting forlornly on the tennis-court and still more forlornly in the recreation-room for two whole hours, while the others played games around her as if she had never existed.

But all things must come to an end and so, at last, did this period of misery. Just before supper came the climax. On leaving the recreation-room the girls were confronted by a small notice in Miss Jevons' neat writing, signed by the Principal and affixed to the notice-board. Nancy pressed forward to look.

The dance, usually given to the School by the Staff on the evening of a holiday, will not take place on Thursday night.

GERALDINE F. PRIMROSE

That was all. But it was the end and Nancy knew it. The whole School would indeed be punished for her fault. Gentle Pamela, watching the new girl with eyes that swam in tears, saw her turn on her heel and march determinedly down the corridor, and when some of the others turned to look for her she was gone.

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In the dormitory that night Nancy was hedged about by a 'double' Coventry. For Miss Primrose had forbidden her to speak to any of her companions, yet in spite of this and the fact that she had, as she phrased it, "had a terrific lecturing," the little girl's heart was lighter than it had been for many hours past.

"Miss Primrose wishes to speak to the whole School in the gymnasium."

Such was the message, delivered in each Form room by a prefect, which collected St Hilda's sixty-three members in the sunlit gymnasium immediately after breakfast the next morning.

On the platform stood Miss Primrose, and some of the keener-eyed spirits among her audience realized that she had difficulty in waiting till all were seated before beginning to speak.

"I am very glad to be able to tell you that I have received a full confession from the girl who was unlawfully in my room on Monday night. Late last night Nancy Haverfield explained that hearing a strange noise in the garden she came down to investigate, and went to my room to look out of the window. It was while there that she overturned the jar of ink, though at the time she was unable to find out what she had knocked down. The noise turned out to be howls from Roger, who had been caught in some barbed wire. I do not wish to detain you longer than I can help, but there are one or two things I wish to

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say. It was a fear of expulsion which prevented the culprit from confessing to me before. This fear having tormented her conscience for nearly twenty-four hours, I am inclined to think that that in itself may be regarded as a considerable part of the punishment. I, therefore, imposed upon Nancy last night a merely nominal punishment, namely, that for the rest of to-day, no girl is to speak to her. With regard to the picnic and dance to-morrow, I am afraid that what I said yesterday will of necessity hold good. The former will take place, the latter will not. You will all," she paused, significantly, "be present at the picnic and I trust that there will be no further reference to this unpleasant episode.—Yes, Daphne, what is the matter—?"

For Daphne had risen to give a full confession of her part in the 'midnight adventure,' to take her place beside Nancy, and to share her punishment.

CHAPTER VIII

Dick

IT is indeed a wonderful relief to remove from the conscience a weight of misdoing unconfessed, and there is even some satisfaction to be derived from the process of ‘paying the bill’ by means of the resulting punishment. Every moment brings nearer the time when the debt will be paid in full, and the wrongdoer will become once more an honoured member of society. Nancy on this sunny Wednesday afternoon was fully conscious of this; fully conscious, too, that more than half of her day’s penance was past, yet at the end of the afternoon she felt unaccountably depressed and even actively miserable. And this in the midst of an atmosphere of great excitement in the School.

At two o’clock Miss Harrington had circulated the pleasing news that a concert was to be transmitted by a big wireless broadcasting apparatus at Paris—the greatest distance from which, as yet, St Hilda’s had ‘received.’

“If I can get our receivers tuned up in time for the concert, which is timed to start at 4.15,” she concluded, “I will connect up to the amplifier, and as many of you as can crowd into the laboratory are invited to come and listen. I hope we shall get

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results as good as those we have had at all the concerts so far."

St Hilda's wireless apparatus was still enough of a novelty to ensure that not a vacant inch would be found in the laboratory if the girls had their way. Accordingly the Third, whose afternoon for science it was, spent most of their time in removing from the shelves and benches every unnecessary article of which the removal might afford "room for one more."

Tea that afternoon was out of the question, the whole School quivered with excitement, and at the stroke of four the laboratory was filled by a chattering, laughing crowd of girls, all agog with excitement and full of anticipation.

One only was there of St Hilda's members who did not make her way thither with the rest. Nancy, despite her keen interest, and, for her age, her remarkable knowledge of the workings of wireless, felt that for once she desired nothing so much as to get away from every one, and be alone, partly to think things out, and partly to forget, if possible, the wretched state of Coventry she was in—since if she were quite alone it would not be so noticeable. Accordingly, fetching her garden hat and a mackintosh from the Junior cloak-room, and her library book from the Fourth classroom, she betook herself to 'Woodlands,' a secluded portion of the shrubbery, between the tennis-courts and the boundary wall, which in summer was much favoured as the ideal spot for a quiet siesta with knitting or a book. The gently

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sloping bank was covered with thick, soft grass, and a few small trees gave just the right amount of shade. Nancy selected her spot with due deliberation, spread her mackintosh, and sat down. The pages of *The Second Form at Woodville* seemed to have fluttered open, of their own accord, at the very place where she had left off, and settling herself more comfortably, Nancy was soon deep in her book. The heroine, one Betty Holland, was sailing (there is no other word for it) through her first term, with great *éclat*. Top of her Form every week, though its youngest member; rising to giddy heights of popularity with every one, from the Headmistress to the gardener's boy, and the central figure in the hundred and one adventures and escapades of her Form, from each of which she emerged covered with glory, she was indeed, especially to-day, an object of real envy to poor Nancy. For a while she read on, rapidly and interestedly, but stopping to separate two refractory pages, which had somehow become stuck together at one corner, she found her attention wandering. "I wonder," she mused, "if things ever do happen like that. It must be splendid to be made to have such a perfectly lovely time as Betty gets. Every one seems to love her, and do everything they possibly can to make her happy. And yet—I can't think why; for I don't call her a bit nice. Just fancy what a temper she got in about that order mark. I——" Nancy turned pink, and her half-unconscious musings came to a sudden end. Who was she to

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criticize another girl—even only a girl in a book—for losing her temper? For was not all her trouble due to that very failing? Had she not been sent to bed the night before by Miss Wentworth, she would probably not have been sufficiently restless to hear Roger's howls, and the whole wretched affair of the overturned inkpot would not have taken place. Nancy stirred uneasily and her book slipped from her fingers. She closed her eyelids, behind which the tears were beginning to smart dangerously. It was true Miss Primrose had forgiven her, but what a tale to have to tell Mother—dear, darling Mums—on her return from Madeira! Oh, how feebly, how very feebly, she had kept all the promises so bravely made to her beloved mother before they parted! She pressed her smarting eyelids more closely together, and strove to swallow the hard lump rising in her throat. She could not wait till Mums came home; she must write next Sunday, and tell her—

"I say, there! Open your eyes, you silly! There's a whopping black-beetle on your collar, and he'll be down your neck in a second!"

Nancy sprang up with a cry, sending *The Second Form at Woodville* rolling down the bank. The first thing she saw was an exceeding plump and elderly-looking black-beetle lying on his back on her lap, his many pairs of spiny legs waving aimlessly in the air, after the manner of his kind when disturbed. Nancy put out a slim brown hand and flicked him

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away to a safe distance before turning her attention to other things.

On the top of the boundary wall sat a boy, one arm in and one out of his jacket. By his side on the wall lay an old telescope, and sticking out of one pocket was a well-worn, red-covered book.

"Sailor's son," decided Nancy. "Telescope, freckles, and screwy-up eyes. Yes, of course, and sunburnt. My age—no, p'raps a bit more. He looks nice. I think——"

At this point the boy's voice broke in upon her thoughts. He had now wriggled into his coat, and was tugging at the brass cap on the telescope.

"You're one of St Hilda's girls, I suppose. I've said that once before, but you don't seem very wide awake!"

Nancy opened her mouth to speak, but checked herself suddenly.

The boy looked at her sharply, and then raised his voice a little. "I say, don't you hear very well?" he demanded.

Nancy reddened. "I—I'm sorry. Only I don't think I ought to—speak to you—to-day. I'm—in Coventry."

"What on earth for?"

Nancy explained briefly, and the boy leaned forward a little at the end of the recital.

"Can you remember exactly what your Head said when she gave your punishment—her very words, I mean?"

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"Yes, I think I can. She said 'For the rest of the day no girl is to speak to you.'"

"I thought so. Good egg!"

"Why?"

"Oh, well—what asses girls are! I—I'd like someone to talk to, that's all, and if she put it that way—your Head, I mean—there's nothing to prevent our having a jaw. 'No girl,' she said, not no-body. Do you know Morse-code?"

He had laid down the telescope now, and was feverishly whipping over the pages of the battered red book.

But again Nancy hesitated to reply, and this time for so long that the boy suddenly seemed to read her thoughts and lifted his head suddenly.

"Miss Primrose knows me well, and Grace, and the pater," he volunteered. "She's often seen me up here, and heard me shout things to you girls, and I don't think she minds a bit. She had me over once a year or two ago to show you girls my birds' eggs. Sensible woman that," he concluded with a grunt.

Nancy smiled.

"Who's Grace? Is she your sister?"

"Yes. Bother! What *is* two dots and a dash?"

"U; the opposite of D. Is she younger than you?" pursued Nancy, scenting a possible new acquaintance.

The boy sat up so sharply that his cap fell off.

"Lordy, no!" His eyes twinkled. "Once there was a curate here who asked her if she was my sister or my mother! She never went to his church again!"

DICK

Poor fool, he only wanted to make conversation, and said the first thing he could think of. Of course, if she'd really been my mother she'd have been charmed," he added sagely.

Nancy laughed delightedly. "It's a pity he didn't reserve his question for your mother."

"My mother is dead," said the boy quietly. "Oh, you needn't look like that. It was long ago, and I don't remember her or anything. She——"

"Yes?" prompted Nancy. She was always full of interest in hearing stories of other people.

"I think she died in India. The pater never mentions her, nor does Grace, and I don't like to ask. Only I seem to remember a little—I don't know—being in India, and the heat, you know—and black people," he ended vaguely.

Nancy nodded. "Three months ago we were in India," she volunteered a little wistfully.

The boy had returned to an examination of his telescope and was whistling softly.

"That so? Well, you'll know more about it than I do. What's your name by the way, and how long have you been at St Hilda's?"

"Nancy Haverfield. I only came this term."

"Oh, I know. It's your people who are coming to live at Prior's Mead, isn't it?"

"Yes. I wish they'd come soon." (A pause.) "You haven't told me your name."

"No. Every one round here seems to know, so I didn't think. It's Dick Drury."

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"Oh, then your father is the Doctor?"

"That's so. He comes to patch you girls up sometimes, after hockey matches and so on."

"I know. Joy Barbour had a bang at cricket the other day and he came."

"Is she the little red-haired one?"

"Red-haired? No; I don't know of a little girl in the school with red hair."

"Oh, then she must have left last term. She was fine at games, and was always in the thick of things. Dad used to say she got a bang every day and two on Sundays. She got to be quite a joke at home."

Nancy nodded. "Oh, I know who you mean. I've heard her talked about. Her name was Hilary Randall."

"Yes? I don't know that I ever heard it. Like to see my wireless?"

"Have you got a set? I thought I noticed aerials."

"Rather! Finest set in Devon. Made it myself," he added modestly.

"What kind of a set? Crystal receiver?"

"No. I say, what do you know about crystal receivers and aerials?"

Nancy flushed. "I wasn't showing off—really—only we had it on board, coming from India—and the Wireless Officer taught me quite a lot."

"Can you read Morse?"

"Yes. And send messages in it."

"Good for you. What's your rate?"

DICK

"Rate? Oh, I don't know; not a bit quick, I should think. Just quick enough to be read easily."

"M-m! Like to hear mine 'tick'?"

"I couldn't come over."

"I know that, silly, but one of my head-pieces is on umpteen yards of wire. Wait a sec. and I'll chuck it over."

Dick swung his legs over the wall and disappeared. Nancy heard the rattle of keys, followed by the opening of a door, and sounds which seemed to come from a shed on the other side of the wall. Then Dick appeared once more and handed down the shining new head-piece, with its trailing length of wire. Nancy fitted it on, and the boy on the wall chuckled at the absorbed expression which stole over her face as she listened. At the end of five minutes she spoke.

"They've stopped. I'd better take it off. Can you reach it? I say, that was splendid. How fast they go! It was a weather report, I think. I caught the word 'heat,' once or twice; it's an easy one to read. They go too fast for me really. Where was all that coming from?"

"Cardiff. I can receive from there or Plymouth, but I can only send up to a few miles."

"The girls are listening to a concert, now, on our set. I think it's coming from France."

"France! Then yours is a three-valve set."

"Yes, I think it is."

"Must be. I say, how topping! It must be the finest set here about."

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"I thought you said yours was," said Nancy wickedly.

"*M-m*, yes, well, mine's home-made. I say, could you send me some messages sometimes, just for practice, you know? I wouldn't mind what it was—a bit out of a history book or anything. I'm a Scout, you know, and I want to get my Signaller's badge. I could send you some stuff now and again, in reply."

Nancy hesitated. "I'd love to," she said at last, "but I'd have to ask Miss Harrington. It's not as if it was my own set, you see."

"That's so. Well, ask and let me know. What's the joke?"

"Did I smile? I'm sorry. It's the way you have of saying, 'That's so!' instead of 'yes.' Daddy always does it, and we do laugh at him so."

Dick grunted. "Sorry for him, then. For so they do at me. Pater and Grace, and every one. Say they can't think where I get it. Must you go?"

"I'm afraid so. I think it must be prep. time. Thank you for letting me listen-in. I'll let you know what Miss Harrington says. Good-bye."

"So long! Here, don't forget your book. What fine heads girls have got to be sure!"

"That's so!" replied Nancy mischievously.

Dick raised his head to hurl a retort, but his new acquaintance was out of sight.

"She's not a bad kid," muttered the boy to himself as he scrambled off the wall.

CHAPTER IX

The Picnic

HELP! Quick! If I don't let somebody's bathing things down into Bessie's pail of water, it will be somebody's camera going smash on the gravel! Qui-ick! Thanks awfully! *Whew!* What an escape!"

Thus Daphne, on the top of the steps leading from the studio to the garden.

Sylvia sprang forward and was just in time to catch a camera and two sets of bathing things as they slipped from Daphne's overloaded arms. Together the two girls descended the steps and having skirted the dangerous bucket of water they crossed the gravel-path and proceeded to pack their many and various bundles under the seats of the waiting wagonette.

It was the morning of the picnic, "come at last," as everybody joyfully phrased it, and much to everyone's relief, the day had turned out a glorious one. Long before the rising-bell sounded, most of the girls were out of bed, eager to see if the skies were clear. One hasty glance sufficed. The day was an ideal one. Indeed, as Miss Primrose herself had remarked to Miss Jevons, it was the most beautiful day of the term, so far.

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Prayers and breakfast, which had been half an hour earlier than usual, were over, and the whole school now buzzed like a beehive, with the merry bustle of 'getting-off.' Seventy bundles of bathing materials, some dozens of cameras, story-books to read on the beach, rugs and cushions to sit on, stumps, bat, and ball for an impromptu game of cricket, and last, but not by any means least, sixty girls in varying states of excitement, and four enormous lunch-hampers, had all to be stowed, neatly and safely, into their respective conveyances. Everybody was very busy, and at the same time very anxious to help everybody else, with the result that every one got into every one else's way, and clamour and confusion reigned supreme. Jenkyn and his assistants from the kitchens were vainly trying to secure a place for those most important articles, the lunch-baskets, when Miss Franklyn appeared on the top of the steps. In a very few minutes she succeeded in bringing order out of chaos, and then, under her able directions, work went on apace. Lunch-baskets secured pride of place in the wagonettes, and then the girls, each carrying her own belongings on her knee, were seated "packed like sardines," as they expressed it, on the narrow seats. A moment later the Staff appeared in a body, carrying another consignment of camp-stools, work-bags and other belongings. Having accomplished the apparently impossible task of finding room for all the girls, but a few minutes before, Miss Franklyn was undaunted by

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the new task which confronted her. In five minutes she had the whole company seated in comparative comfort; those of the kitchen staff who had been selected to take charge of the lunch, piled in with spirit-stoves, kettles and milk-cans, riding in another wagonette in the rear. They were off at last! Miss Franklyn sank back into her seat with a sigh of relief.

"Oh, dear! What a tussle! It really is no joke to take a family of sixty for a picnic."

"Seventy!" said Miss Harrington wickedly. "You forget there are ten of us!"

"Not at all. How could I forget you, when you arrived at the last minute, and confronted me with the task of stuffing ten people into space meant for about two? But I do not include you in my estimate, because I should hope you do not require as much looking after as the younger members of my large family. Miss Wentworth, I do hope I am not as untidy as I feel. You are bending a most stern eye upon me."

"Am I? I was thinking deeply. No, I assure you you look charming."

"Really, that is extremely nice of you. Were it not for the fact that I am jammed in between two very fat Sixth Form girls, I would rise, and make you a bow."

Thus, amid laughter and good-humoured chaffing, the miles flew by. It was a rare and pleasant experience for the girls to see the mistresses in holiday vein,

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and Rose and Jean took Miss Franklyn's aspersions on the daintiness of their figures with perfect equanimity.

In the front wagonette some bright soul had started a game of "I spy," in which as the result of her rule that nothing in the wagonette might be 'spied,' the fun soon waxed fast and furious.

"Oh, dear!" cried Patty, who was making frenzied guesses as the fields and hedges flew by, "how quick you have to be! Is it really nearly out of sight?"

Presently the whole procession halted at a turnpike gate. The game stopped for a moment, and silence fell on the group. Suddenly Daphne raised her head.

"Look!" she cried, "there's a little cloud. Oh, what if it should rain? How dreadful! I can almost imagine I feel spots!"

Ray Barlowe tilted her sun-hat farther over her eyes and settled comfortably in her seat.

"You aren't going to scare us over a cloud that size!" she cried. "It's no bigger than a man's hand. Rain, indeed, on a day like this. What an old Pussyfoot you are!"

"An old what? What does she mean, Miss Windsor?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. Rain is not a very satisfying drink, to a Pussyfoot or anyone else."

"I'm not talking about drinking," protested Ray. "I mean it's a jolly gloomy view to take, that it may rain—to-day of all days."

Miss Windsor and two or three of the girls collapsed

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forthwith, much to the wonder of the mystified Ray. Pamela was the first to recover.

" You muggins! " she gasped. " You mean ' pessimist '—not ' Pussyfoot '!"

There was a renewed burst of laughter, in which Ray joined, as the wagonettes moved on again.

" Well, what does it matter? " she protested. " You knew what I meant anyway. Oh, how tenderly I can feel for poor Mrs Malaprop and her troubles."

She rolled her eyes heavenward with an exaggerated look of what was meant to be sympathy, and after a few more giggles the girls returned to their game. It seemed but a few minutes later that the wagonettes topped the brow of the steep hill, and the girls, anxiously peering over each other's shoulders, caught their first sight of the sea. The road skirted the edge of the cliffs for a short distance, and then began to wind its way down to the beach. At times it was overhung by pine-trees, but at length the slope lessened, and the trees and bushes grew scarcer, giving place to scrubby grass, and patches of sea-holly, while here and there the rocks peeped through the green. To the right of the road lay the broad, smooth expanse of the sea, dancing and sparkling in the sunshine, while ahead lay the little beach chosen by Miss Primrose for the day's outing. *Bump! bump! bump!* over the rough grass went the wagonettes, for the road had disappeared now. At last they came to a stop near a tiny natural breakwater

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running down to the sea, and the girls, scrambling down from their lofty perch, stamped their cramped feet on the ground, and made merry mock of one another's aching limbs. The 'luggage' was stowed away in one of the many small caves in the cliffs, and then Miss Primrose called for silence.

"It is now eleven o'clock," she began. "I would like you to bathe at about twelve, when the tide will be a little higher. I will blow my whistle and you may make up parties, and undress in the various caves. After the bathe you must all go for a run along the beach, which will be followed by lunch, and half an hour's rest, after which you may do as you wish. Meanwhile you may like to explore. Be sure to listen for the whistle."

She turned away, and the girls scattered in various directions, talking and laughing. A few energetic souls set off up the cliff path to hunt for sea-pinks. Others disappeared along the shore to right and left to seek for treasure-trove in the rock pools. In the shadow of the breakwater Miss Primrose and the rest of the Staff settled down to a peaceful hour with books and needlework, while down on the beach a handful of noisy Juniors were vigorously driving in stumps and 'picking up sides' for a game of cricket. The kitchen staff, having carried down the lunch-hampers and removed the straps, were chatting in the shade of one of the wagonettes. Even the horses, their harnesses removed, wandered at leisure over the short grass, or lay basking in the sunshine—their long

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legs outstretched, and tails idly swishing away some tantalizing fly.

Nancy, still feeling somewhat shy of her companions after the previous day spent in Coventry, was loath to force her company upon any of these groups uninvited. Having disposed of her bathing bundle and camera, she was making her way, story-book in hand, towards a small isolated ledge on the cliff when Pamela hailed her.

"Nancy! Where are you off to? Come and sit on this bank with me; the sun is lovely just here."

Nancy turned aside, and joined Pamela at the spot indicated, settling down joyfully beside her companion. In a few moments both girls were absorbed in their books, and though neither spoke during the hour that elapsed before the sound of Miss Primrose's whistle, yet as they crossed the beach to prepare for the bathe, Nancy was happier at heart than she had been for some time, for Pamela's air was one of quiet friendliness, and complete forgetfulness of all unpleasant events of the past.

The rest of the school, however, did not seem disposed to follow Pamela's example and 'bury the hatchet.' They could not forget that through Nancy they had been deprived of the much hoped-for fancy-dress dance that would have been given, as a matter of custom, after the picnic. These dances, given by the Staff to the School on the evening of a holiday, were very informal little affairs, and the fancy costumes of both mistresses and girls were usually of the

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most rough-and-ready description, but the fun was usually of the best, and the girls always felt as if a holiday could not be complete without a dance to end the day's enjoyment. Accordingly, therefore, Seniors and Juniors alike smarted under the injury which, it was felt, they owed to Nancy's refusal to confess her share in the inkpot episode of two days before. Nancy, in her turn, was too proud to force her company upon girls who let it be plainly seen that they had no desire for it, and as a result she had to depend solely upon the kindly offices of Pamela for companionship. Quite unobtrusively, and without making either side appear in the limelight, Pamela managed to keep the new girl from feeling out in the cold. Together they undressed, bathed, and took their run on the beach, and when Miss Primrose's whistle sounded again, this time to announce that lunch was ready, it was Pamela who found a seat for Nancy next to her on a ledge of rock. The cloth had been laid on a patch of short, close grass, its corners weighted with large pebbles. The lunch was laid out on it in what Patty described as "close formation," and while the Staff and girls sat about in little groups on the rocks and beach, Jenkyn and his energetic assistants waited on the hungry multitude. Boxes of biscuits and bottles of lemonade were opened; packets of sandwiches, neatly tied up in grease-proof paper, were handed round, plates of small tarts and fruit began to pass from hand to hand, and soon the good things disappeared like snow in the sun.

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Daphne, having consumed her packet of sandwiches, two tarts, several biscuits, a banana, and a glass of lemonade, was leaning idly against a rock, wrapping a large pebble carefully in many folds of grease-proof paper, preparatory to offering the parcel to Patty as a practical joke. Suddenly she sat up.

"Yes, I agree with you," she murmured with a chuckle. "It can't be."

Sylvia, who was perched on the rock above, followed the direction of her companion's gaze. Nothing more striking than the bowed figure of Jenkyn, hastily unpacking his fourth tin of biscuits, met her eye. She touched Daphne's shoulder lightly with her foot.

"What are you talking about?"

"Jenkyn. Didn't you hear what he said? He was rushing over to that biscuit-tin, puffing like an old motor-bike, and as he passed, he said to Bessie, 'It's no joke, that it ain't, to feed seventy young ladies, each with an 'ealthy h'appetite—what you young women would call h'out-size.' Whereupon Bessie scowled at him, I s'pose for thinking she knew anything about 'out-size,' but I, seeing his point, ventured to agree with him. It really must be true what he says. I was just thinking——"

At this point a call for silence from Miss Primrose broke in upon Daphne's theorizing.

"I see you have nearly all finished your lunch," she began, "so you may scatter now for your half-hour

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of rest. This Japanese sunshade will serve as an admirable signal. As long as it remains open, and sticking in the sand as you see it now, no one is to get up or run about, but when the half-hour is up, I will close it and put it aside. You may then do as you like till my whistle at tea-time, except that no one is to go round that point. The tide is still rising and the little bay beyond the point will be quite cut off in a couple of hours' time. I have no desire to have to fetch any of you from there in a lifeboat, so do not forget what I have said."

Miss Primrose stood up as she finished speaking and joined Miss Windsor on a shady ledge of rock. The girls, picking up their books, dispersed in twos and threes in search of comfortable nooks in which to pass the compulsory half-hour of rest. Nancy, seeing that Painela was speaking to one of the mistresses, turned away alone in the direction of the forbidden headland. During lunch, she had noticed an enticing-looking nook, formed of what had apparently been at one time a rock pool. Filled now with soft yellow sand, it looked an ideal couch for a cosy siesta, and being well on the right side of the bounds set by Miss Primrose, it caused no feelings of compunction in Nancy's heart as she set off toward it.

In a few minutes she was settled in her cosy nest, her head pillowed on the sand, *The Second Form at Woodville* open in the crook of her arm. From where she lay she could command a view across the whole

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of the little bay where they had picnicked, to the ruined fisherman's hut at the other end. A few of the girls had selected positions within range of her eye, the rest had disappeared. Pamela, having ended her conversation, had turned round to find Nancy gone; whereupon she had attached herself to a little group resting near one of the caves. Just where the coarse grass joined the beach sat the Staff, in a little circle about Miss Primrose's Japanese sunshade, reduced by distance to a small scarlet disc.

"But I can easily tell when it's down," reflected Nancy, as she settled herself more comfortably in the sand. "Now for a good, long read." Five minutes later, the sun being hot, and her position a comfortable one, she was asleep.

She awoke with a start, and sat up, looking vacantly round for a moment, before recollection came to her. Ah, yes, the picnic, and the half-hour's rest after lunch! The sunshade was gone. So for that matter was the little group that had been gathered round it. Indeed, for the first moment or two there appeared to be no living soul in sight. Then at the mouth of one of the caves appeared Miss Wentworth, barefooted and wet-haired, carrying a bathing costume, which she proceeded to rinse in one of the rock pools.

"So they've been bathing," mused Nancy, "and finished, too. I must have been asleep some time." She glanced at her watch. "Four o'clock! Good

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gracious! The whole afternoon gone! Surely they can't have had tea! I thought the tide was high. Why on earth couldn't it have made noise enough to wake me sooner?"

She had scrambled to her feet as she spoke, and shaking the sand from her dress she moved off across the rocks. Almost immediately she stopped, and looked back. What was that? Surely a human cry! It seemed to come from the little bay Miss Primrose had mentioned. But surely there could be no one there! Miss Primrose had said that the bay would be quite cut off by now, and the tide was still coming in. Ah! there it was again, a little clearer this time, though still almost drowned by the noise of the incoming tide.

"Help! Help!"

Yes, it must be someone, a fisher-boy, probably, caught in the little bay, and calling for help. Nancy scrambled back to her perch, and stood on tiptoe on a tiny ledge, sweeping her eyes round the curve of the beach.

Then for an instant it seemed as if her heart had stopped beating.

Across the bay, rock-bound on three of its sides, stretched a long line of breakers, hungrily covering, little by little, the remaining semicircular patch of dry sand. And in the midst of the patch sat—Angela King!

Nancy's library book slipped from her fingers, and her curved hands flew to her mouth.

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"Get up!" she shouted. "If you run across here, and wade, I may be able to help you up the rocks. Run, for goodness' sake! You'll get caught!"

Angela pointed despairingly to her right foot, and Nancy could see that it was stockingless, and roughly tied with a white handkerchief. A moment later, a bigger wave than usual ran up the beach, and Angela crawled painfully a little nearer to the cliffs. During that moment Nancy stood irresolute, the fires of temptation scorching her soul. This was Angela, the girl who had been ready to accuse her of unfair dealing in the game the other night, and who had thus been at the bottom of all her troubles. She was on forbidden ground, and the plight she was now in was the just reward of disobedience. In the other direction no one was in sight, and no one would be any the wiser if she strolled back to the wagonettes and left her enemy to get a thorough wetting, and, having missed her tea, to turn up later, when the tide had gone down. Besides, she herself would have to go on to forbidden ground to help Angela. Her eyes wandered back to the little bay as she stood debating with herself, and suddenly cold beads of perspiration broke out on her forehead. Ah! Look up! The high-tide line, glistening and green, far and far above Angela's head as she sat on the sand! No one could be on that beach at high-water. They would be dr—

With a sob in her throat Nancy leapt forward.

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She scrambled down over the rocks, stood for an instant on the lowest ledge, and then jumped down on to the sand, already at this point more than knee-high in water. She plunged through the breakers and ran up the beach, her skirts flopping suddenly about her legs.

Angela turned a white face toward her rescuer.

"I've sprained my ankle. And cut it too, on some glass. I jumped off a rock, and only had sand-shoes on. It's bleeding a little, and I can't stand."

A hundred questions, as to how Angela came to be on forbidden ground, crowded Nancy's brain, but she brushed them aside, and dropping on her knees bent over the injured foot.

"Can't you really walk? Let me tie the hanky tighter, to stop the bleeding."

Angela threw out her hand with a cry.

"No! Don't, oh, don't! I did that, and it hurts much worse."

"Well, I'll undo it then," returned Nancy, "and have a look at it. Only we must hurry. We'll have to wade as it is. Why, you muggins! you've left the glass in. No wonder it hurts! A big spear-shaped bit. Is that someone climbing down the cliff?"

Angela looked up innocently, and Nancy, leaning forward, took the long, blade-shaped piece of glass between her finger and thumb and gently but firmly removed it from the wound. A stab of pain and a

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rush of blood from the cut recalled the victim's thoughts and eyes. A flood of frightened expostulation, half-tearful, half-angry, rose to her lips, and she turned upon Nancy a face which was, if anything, whiter than before. But Nancy was already binding up the wound with steady if amateurish movements.

"There! Now I'm going to take off my petticoat and tear some strips from that. Hold this end a minute. Now pull. That's it. Just put your finger on this knot. Good. Now try to stand; you can lean on me. Don't be in too much hurry or you may fall. You'll have to wade at the end of the beach. The salt water will hurt your cut a bit, I expect, but never mind, it will do good really. Are you ready? Then let's move."

Slowly the two girls set off along the beach; Angela, limping painfully, supported on Nancy's left arm. Nearer and nearer grew the wall of rock, as they moved slowly over the shingle, Nancy encouraging her companion somewhat breathlessly as they walked. She caught her breath with dismay as they reached the rocks, and she noticed that the ledge from which she had jumped into the breakers was already covered by the tide.

"Oh, dear, we must hurry. You can swim, I suppose, if the waves happen to lift you off your feet. I don't think it'll really be out of our depth."

Trembling with fright Angela clung convulsively to the younger girl's arm.

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"No, I can't swim a stroke! Oh, dear, what shall I do? I shall be——"

"Shut up! There's no time for that. Mind where you step, and don't slip on a rock, or some weed. It's lucky the water isn't cold."

A cry of pain broke from the elder girl's lips as the salt water soaked through the impromptu bandages and entered the already throbbing wound. Nancy set her teeth, and drawing her companion after her, moved out into deeper water. Here the breakers were more boisterous, and it was all the girls could do to keep their feet. Again and again a wave would break—nearly waist-high now, throwing them roughly against each other, or the rugged wall of rock above their heads. Angela, gasping and sobbing with pain and fright, stopped suddenly.

"I can't go any farther! It's getting deeper and I know I should go down. Can't we try to climb over here, instead of going on?"

Nancy shook her head. "No. Look how it overhangs. We must get out to that ledge. I wish I'd taken my shoes off."

During the days that followed, Nancy scarcely forgot for one moment the nightmarish horror of that last stage of the journey, and often during the night she woke in a fever of terror, recalling every agonizing detail of the struggle against time and the tide.

Gasping and choking, buffeted now against the

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rocks, now against each other, they pressed on. Between the breakers the water was now up to their arm-pits, but each wave broke in a choking green mass over their heads, leaving them clinging to each other half-blinded by spray.

"Climb up, now," ordered Nancy at length. "But hold tight. The waves are worse than ever up on the rocks. Climb up here. That's it. Ah! Now stop a minute. This way now; to the left. Don't lean against me like that! *Angela!* stand up! I can't hold you, you're too heavy. *Oh—ah!*" Angela had fainted, and lay a dead weight on the rocks, the water breaking over her. There was no time to be lost, despite the fact that they were out of reach of danger if they stood up. Angela was almost continuously under water as she lay there, and a larger wave than usual might easily roll her body off the ledge into deep water. With an almost superhuman effort Nancy raised her in both arms, seeking wildly for a grip on the stout cotton girdle encircling her companion's gym-frock. Her own face was bleeding a little now, from a cut above the eye on a jagged piece of rock. Angela was slipping. . . . Was it the girdle broken? . . . This blood was a nuisance. . . . How could she see with that in her eyes? . . . Why didn't Angela get up, and save herself? What did it matter anyway? . . . She was too tired to do more. It must be—

The end. One step more and poor, tired Nancy, herself well-nigh unconscious, but with her precious

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burden saved from those cruel waves, fell almost into the arms of Jenkyn and two of the coachmen.

"I brought her up from the beach," she murmured. "Her foot wants seeing to." Then she, too, closed her weary eyes in a faint, as Angela had done, and Miss Primrose, stepping across the rocks, took her, like a baby, into her own arms.

CHAPTER X

The Mystery

A LIGHT in the Third Form room after midnight, did you say?"

The speaker was Sylvia, who with Patty Thornton was seated in one of the wide window-seats of the recreation-room. The room was full of girls amusing themselves in various ways during the half-hour before bedtime. Some were reading, some sewing, and others playing games. Sylvia and Patty, alone among the thirty-odd girls the room contained, were at present occupied in none of these ways. They had withdrawn far into the window-recess and were engaged in earnest conversation.

Patty tied a complicated knot in the blind-cord.

"No, not *in* it. I wish it was. It wouldn't be such a mystery. It was shining out from *under* it—from a kind of cellar window, and throwing such a queer glare on the lawn."

"How did you come to find it out?"

"I got out of bed for a drink. The water on my wash-stand seemed quite warm—you know what a hot night it was—and I went along to the bathroom for some more. I could see the light quite plainly from the window on the landing."

Sylvia nodded thoughtfully.

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" You would. It seems awfully funny. It was candle-light, I suppose?"

" No, that's the queer part of it. There's no gas or anything down in the cellars, surely, and yet I could swear this was a gas-light, or perhaps electric. At any rate it was too white and glary for candle-light."

" How funny. Do you think we ought to tell Miss Primrose?"

" *M-m!* No, I don't think so. At any rate, not just yet. To tell you the truth, I rather think I should like to get to the bottom of the matter myself before speaking. You see, if it's really a mystery, and there's something illegal going on, it would be rather a fine thing for me to have ferreted it out. On the other hand, if it were Prim herself hunting for a banging door or a draughty window, think what fools we should feel."

" Yes, I see your point. Then you advise sitting tight for a time?"

" Not exactly. What I should like would be to find out if it happens again another night. I meant to have stayed up last night, but I was too tired after the picnic and all the worry of the Angela King affair. Besides, I wanted company. That is really why I have told you about it. Are you game to help? After all, two heads are better than one, even if they are only sheep's heads!"

Sylvia chuckled. " Thanks for the compliment. I think you might speak for yourself. What do you want me to do, though?"

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"Oh, you needn't sound so apprehensive. I'll just slip into your cubi and shake you, somewhere about midnight to-night, and we'll creep along to the landing window, and see what is to be seen. If there is anything exciting, we might explore—if not, well and good, we can hop back to bed, and try again another night. Are you game?"

Sylvia nodded her head vigorously. "Of course I am. Anything for excitement. Only you will have to wake me, for I always sleep soundly, from the moment my head touches the pillow till the rising-bell sounds next morning."

"All right. I'll come. I'm good at keeping awake. You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"No."

There was silence for a moment and then Sylvia spoke again.

"Talking of the Angela King affair—what *did* happen? I heard you and Pamela talking about it in lunch-time, but I really know nothing. I just saw Prim and the men pack them into a wagonette, cover them with rugs and drive off home. But I was on top of the cliffs. They nearly got drowned, didn't they?"

"Yes. Matron looked after them all night, and while I was waiting for my bath to fill this morning, she told me about it. It appears Angela went over to that other beach to explore, thinking no one would know, and in jumping off a rock sprained her ankle, turning it over on to a piece of glass and

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cutting it. Then the tide came in, and she couldn't get away, even if she could have walked. Nancy heard her call and climbed down to her. Angela says she tied up the foot, after taking out the glass, and helped her to wade out and climb over the little headland. Meanwhile some of the Seniors walking on the cliffs had seen them struggling against the waves, and they ran down and warned Prim, who took the men up the cliff and down along the reef. They were wet through, of course, for the water was over their heads at times—the waves, you know—when Helen and Rose saw them. Angela had fainted, and Nancy was dragging her by her girdle. Jenkyn was just in time to catch her as she fainted, too."

"How are they to-day? Have you heard?" inquired Sylvia.

"Oh, I think they're all right," was the reply. "At any rate Angela's well enough to grumble at Nancy for not finding a way to save her without getting her clothes wet. Jolly fine for Nancy I call that, after what she did. I'm not keen on the girl or anything like that, but I think it's rather hard lines."

"Oh, do her good," returned Sylvia loftily. "Miss Nancy Haverfield is a lady who can do with a good deal of snubbing. There's the bed-bell. Are you coming?"

One o'clock! Patty rolled over in bed and sat up. Cautiously she put aside the bedclothes and felt for her dressing-gown. Slipping her feet into bedroom

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slippers, she groped her way to Sylvia's cubicle. Its occupant was sleeping soundly. Patty bent forward and touched the sleeper's shoulder.

"Sylvia! Wake up, it's long after twelve. I went to sleep and didn't hear it strike. You surely haven't forgotten that you were coming to explore with me."

Sylvia moved slightly and was awake in an instant.

"Hold back the curtain," she whispered. "I can't find my slippers. Oh, thanks, here they are. Don't knock against the furniture, whatever you do. I wouldn't have anyone waked for the world. We'd better shut the door, hadn't we?"

"Yes, I think so. It might just possibly bang, and it's not a noisy one to open, on the way back. This way."

Much to Sylvia's surprise, Patty had suddenly turned down a short flight of stairs. Sylvia pressed forward to her companion's side and spoke rapidly.

"Where are you going? We want the landing window."

"*Sh!* Don't talk so loudly; you'll have the whole house awake, if you're not careful. I just had a brain-wave that we could see better from this box-room. Shut the door after you. That's right. No, there's no handle. Just push it, like a cupboard."

The box-room was a long, narrow slip of a room, lighted only by one small window high up in the wall. Sylvia turned round from shutting the door to find Patty on her knees pushing vigorously at a heavy

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trunk, one of many for which the room had been used as a store.

"Come and help me. I want this under the window. It's much too high to look out of."

By dint of much tugging and pushing, the investigators at last succeeded in placing the heavy box just below the window. Sylvia stood up, shaking back her long dark hair.

"Hop up! I say, don't push so. Surely you don't want all the room——!"

"I'm not pushing. You shouldn't be so fat. *Whew!* I say! There it is. Just the same as before."

"Goodness! What can it be?" Sylvia raised herself on tiptoe, leaning her chin on the narrow window-ledge. "It's very weird, isn't it?"

"Rather! D'you know what I'm going to do?"

"No, what?"

"I'm going round to the Third Form room to see what I can find. Will you come?"

"Oh, Patty! Dare we? Suppose someone caught us!"

Patty sniffed. "Catch your grandmother! Every one's asleep, and I don't intend to shout 'John Brown's body' all the way over, or fall downstairs, or do anything to liven matters up. No one'll catch us. Are you coming or not?"

"I suppose so, if you are. Hadn't we better put the trunk back?"

"No, leave it. We may want another peep on

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the homeward journey. But shut the door. Good, now come on. Mind the stairs. I say, just look at the moonlight in the boot-room."

"Ugh! I don't like it. It looks creepy. Don't stand gaping there. Now which *is* the Third Form room?"

"Count the doors, you stupid. Fourth from the left. Here. Now, who dares open it?"

"You can. You suggested coming over. I wouldn't for the world. It's your expedition."

"My suggestion," corrected Patty. "But you agreed to it. It's only fair you should do your share."

"I couldn't open that door, anyway," declared Sylvia; "really, I couldn't. Not if I stayed here all night. But if you'll open it, I'll go in first."

"All right then, here goes!" Patty crept up to the door, groped for the handle, and turned it, softly and slowly. Sylvia, standing back in the hall, expecting to see a shaft of yellow light rising from an open trap-door in the floor began to grow impatient.

"Are you going to open it?"

Patty stifled a laugh. "It—it's open. There's nothing there."

Full of courage now, Sylvia led the way into the darkened Form room. Hand in hand, the two girls made a tour of the room, searching closely for any indication of another presence beside their own. But they were doomed to disappointment. The

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room was wrapped in complete darkness, and a silence so deep that, as they paused near the window, it almost seemed to Patty that she could hear the beating of her own heart, and she found herself wondering if Sylvia could hear it, too. Indeed, as Sylvia said afterward, had it not been for the evidence of their eyes, in that long, uncanny gleam of light streaming out through the plants in the flower-bed beneath the window, she could almost have believed that they had been deceived by their imaginations, and that there was no mystery to be solved.

"I'm going back to bed," she whispered at last. "There's nothing to be found out here, and nothing to be gained by staying, as far as I can see."

"I s'pose not," admitted Patty, regretfully. "It's a shame. But, still, there *is* this about it, that we know it's happened more than once, and not just on one occasion. That's useful anyway."

Disappointedly, the baffled detectives turned away, and, closing the Form room door, groped their way down the passage, across the hall, and upstairs. A peep through the box-room window, before returning to the Blue dormitory, revealed the fact that the light was still to be seen, a circumstance which added in no small degree to the curiosity of the pair.

"Half-past one," muttered Patty, as she helped to replace the trunk, "just struck. It's been on for half an hour, then, to my knowledge. That shows it can't be Prim or anyone exploring. Look here,

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Sylvia, this business has got to be cleared up. To-morrow I'm going to tell Margery, and Molly, and Daphne, and Joyce, and perhaps Rotha and Norah Golding. That would make eight with our two selves—and one of the number a Third Form girl. We must then arrange to explore, two of us every night, till we get at the meaning of that light. I'm certain it's something wrong—something exciting anyway, and I mean to get to the bottom of it or die in the attempt. To-night's been a rotten sell, but I don't intend to let it discourage me. Be sure you get into bed quietly. Good night."

The next morning, true to her word, Patty summoned a meeting of the half-dozen favoured ones whose support she desired in unravelling the mystery. In a secluded corner of the recreation-room, before morning school, she disclosed the great secret, deriving no small joy, it must be confessed, from the sight of the surprise and interest depicted on the faces of five of her hearers. But the sixth exploded a bomb-shell for which she was totally unprepared.

"A light under the Third Form room?" inquired Daphne. "When did you first see it?"

"On Wednesday night," replied Patty. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, only because I wondered whether you or I saw it first," returned Daphne, with studied carelessness.

"W—what! Have you seen it?" Patty flopped

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weakly into a chair, and stared blankly at Daphne, who, with meticulous care, was examining the nib of a fountain-pen, and apparently dead to all else.

"When did you see it?" she pursued. "Are you quite sure you weren't dreaming?"

"Of course I wasn't. You were wide awake enough last night, weren't you? It was easy to see, when I found it out, anyway, a hundred miles off."

"When was it?" repeated Patty, sceptically.

Daphne coloured. "The—the night Roger howled," she said at length. "That was Monday."

Patty took no notice of the other's evident embarrassment. "What time?"

"I don't know a bit. After midnight I should think. Yes, of course,"—she coloured again—"I remember Miss Primrose said she didn't leave her room till midnight, and it was later than that when——"

She stopped suddenly and averted her eyes from the group round her. She had been on the point of mentioning Nancy's name in connexion with the affair, and had suddenly realized that at present it was not the fashion in the Fourth to acknowledge that young person's existence. It may be wondered at that Nancy was not something of a heroine in view of the events of the day before, but Miss Primrose had refrained from any discussion of the affair,

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with the result that as yet few people knew which was rescuer and which rescued.

Patty raised her head at the interruption. "When what?"

"When I was there. Do you want me to watch to-night? If so, I will—with Rotha." She hurried on, eager to change the trend of the conversation. "May I tell Angela? I think she'd be keen, and she's rather good at ferreting things out. Remember the loss of your penknife."

Patty deliberated a moment before replying. "Yes, I suppose so," she said at length. "She's in the sick-room, isn't she? And so's Nancy Haverfield."

"I shouldn't tell *her*, of course. But I'm to see Angy to-night for a few minutes and I'm sure I can manage it. We watch to-night, then, from midnight?"

"That's it. Success to your arms! There's the first bell."

During the days—or more correctly the nights—which followed, the mystery of the Third Form room received considerable attention from certain members of the Fourth. Two and two they watched each night, endeavouring to obtain a solution, but always without success. The light appeared practically every night, but that was the most that anyone was able to say. No means of approach to the mysterious cellar could be found, despite the repeated attempts of the amateur detectives of the Fourth.

Occasionally, indeed, their rambles ended some-

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what ludicrously. Mollie, on the watch one night with Margery, had heard voices in the mysterious cellar, and, seized with a conviction that they were getting louder, had fled basely, under the impression that half St Hilda's was at her heels. In an agony of fear she had turned into one of the bathrooms and hopped nimbly into the bath, only to find it half-full of cold water, left by some zealous but forgetful young photographer.

On another night, Daphne, waiting in a pitchy-black corner of the hall, had been startled into uttering a scream when an old black coat, used by Miss Primrose when gardening, suddenly broke its hanger and descended in a stifling black mass on her shoulders. Despite the fact that no one, apparently, heard the scream, Daphne felt fit for no more exploration that night, and had perforce to return disappointed to bed.

Throughout the week, too, she had been disappointed of her promised interview with Angela. The latter had by no means recovered from her unpleasant experience at the picnic, being in a weak and highly nervous state. On the Friday afternoon, however, Daphne was at last admitted to the sick-room, and lost no time in unfolding to the invalid the mysterious and intriguing story. Nancy, partially detained in the sick-room even yet, and only appearing in public at meal-times, was mercifully spared a good deal of the neglect which would certainly have been her portion in the Fourth. She lay

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now on the other bed, resting after her music practice, which, in view of her approaching examination, she had been allowed to maintain uninterruptedly during the week. She paid but little attention to the hurried whisperings from the other bed, beyond thinking that, judging from the sounds, Angela was becoming very excited and would probably pass a proportionately restless night in consequence. At last the conversation was terminated by the appearance of Matron with some medicine for her patient, and shortly afterward Daphne took her leave.

It was twelve o'clock. Angela lay on her narrow bed in the sick-room, tossing and turning in a fever of anxiety. Why, oh why was she in this wretched place, just when she would have given her right hand to be up and about, and to solve that mystery of the Third Form room?

"Nancy knows of that light I'm sure," she fretted. "She muttered about it in her sleep the other night. She's always first with everything, and if she weren't shut up here, she'd be first with the solution of that. I'm going to have a look at it for myself, if my legs aren't too shaky."

Softly she crept out of bed, and, wrapped in her dressing-gown, made her way down the stairs to the landing window. She moved but slowly, for her natural fear, added to the effects of her weak state, sapped her strength. She clung convulsively to the hand-rail as she descended the stairs, all unconscious

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that Daphne and Rotha, on the way back from their explorations, were in the hall below, hiding in a dark corner, and fearfully watching her shadowy figure making its slow journey down the stairs.

The landing window at last! Slowly she drew aside the curtain and peered out. Ah! Daphne had said a white and steady light. But this—oh, horrors!—was red and flickering. She could almost fancy she heard the roar and crackle of the flames.

With a breathless cry of “Fire! Fire!” she turned and rushed up the stairs, uttering scream after scream of terror.

Down in the hall, Daphne and Rotha, feeling discovery imminent, had fled across the ground floor and up to their dormitory by way of the back stairs. Miss Primrose, hurrying forth from her room, disturbed by Angela’s cries, at once came to the conclusion that the invalid had been sleep-walking, and without speaking to her, had taken her gently by the arm to lead her back to bed. At the corner of the landing, to her great surprise, stood a small figure in a dressing-gown, with long plaits of dark hair falling on her shoulders.

“Why, Nancy, child, what are you doing out of bed?” began the Principal.

Nancy moved forward. “Angela and I are still in the sick-room, Miss Primrose,” she explained. “I woke and found her gone and——”

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"Hush; yes, I see. She has been walking in her sleep, but no harm is done. Help me to get her back to bed, please, as quietly as you can."

Angela, seeing how the land lay, decided to take advantage of Miss Primrose's mistake, and, anxious to save herself from unpleasant inquiries, submitted silently to the Principal's ministrations. In a few minutes silence reigned again in the great house, and so ended an eventful night for more than one inmate of St Hilda's.

CHAPTER XI

The Examination

AT the close of afternoon school, on the Tuesday following the events narrated in the last chapter, the whole School assembled as usual in the chapel for prayers. Much to everyone's surprise, however, Miss Primrose did not appear, sending instead a message to the effect that she wished to see the whole School in the gymnasium after prayers. Accordingly, as Mr Graves closed his book and left the Chapel, the doors leading to the gymnasium were thrown open and the girls, full of interest, trooped in and took their seats.

In a few moments Miss Primrose entered by way of the small door opening on to the platform. In her hands she carried a sheaf of papers, and, crossing the platform, she at once began to speak.

"We are nearing half-term," she announced, "and I sent for you all as I have one or two notices of interest to make public." After referring to one or two fixtures in the village—a bazaar, a flower-show, and some sports—to which it was proposed to take small detachments of girls as representatives of St Hilda's, Miss Primrose glanced at a large blue document which she had laid on the desk before her.

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"The Music Examinations of the Associated Board," she went on, "will be held in the large music-room one week from to-morrow. Candidates for Primary and Elementary Divisions will be examined in the morning; those for Lower and Higher Divisions in the afternoon, and you will present yourselves in alphabetical order in the several divisions. Detailed lists will appear in due course, showing the time at which each candidate is to be ready in the waiting-room. Mr Copping wishes to see all candidates before to-morrow night to advise as to extra practice, after which Miss Jevons will issue a time-table. I understand we have thirteen candidates, and I trust we shall have thirteen successes. Let me see. Yes, three for Primary Division, two for Elementary, five for Lower Division and three for Higher. As a matter of form I will read the complete list, though I expect"—she smiled slightly—"the girls in question will need very little reminding. Primary Division: Mary Nelson, Barbara Golding, Alison Gower. Elementary: Joyce Winter and Dorothea Hope. Lower Division: Rotha Holland, Angela King, Pamela Hayman, Nancy Haverfield, Patty Thornton. Higher Division: Daphne Heritage, Mollie Newbery, and Iris Phillips. I trust you will all work well in the few days that remain to you and achieve good results. The examiner, I see, is Sir Martin Ransdale, who was here once before, several years ago. Do not forget, any of you, to see Mr Copping to-

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morrow. By the way, Helen, are all the candidates present?"

Helen referred to the roll-call book on the desk before her. "Angela King and Nancy Haverfield are still in the sick-room, Miss Primrose."

The Principal nodded, "Ah, yes; Miss Jevons will see them direct. Angela will be in school again in a day or two, and Nancy probably to-morrow. Which reminds me of another matter. The annual match against St Margaret's Priory at Ashcombe, for the Ashcombe silver shield, will take place on July 9th. The six girls who will play for St Hilda's will be chosen, as usual, by the Games Committee with reference to their record of play for the term. As you know, it has always been the custom to play the match alternately on our courts and the Priory courts at Ashcombe, and this year the turn would be ours. It has been suggested, however, by the Ashcombe Town Tennis Club that the match, always a big social event in the neighbourhood, shall take place on their range of courts which forms a part of their new Pleasure Park to be opened, strange to say, on the date fixed for our match. In agreement with the Superior of St Margaret's, I have accepted the invitation of the Tennis Club to use their courts and the match will, therefore, be played there. It will make very little difference to any of you, as you will be able to get used to the courts beforehand. You will of course have to play your game before a larger audience. I am sorry that Nancy Haverfield

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is not here, for the reason that what I am now about to say is of interest to her. There is at present staying at the Rectory at Ashcombe, an Indian Princess, who met the Rector and Mrs Wylde some years ago in India, and it is she who has been asked to open the Pleasure Park. I have been asked to allow a St Hilda's girl to present a bouquet to the Princess at the close of the opening ceremony. The Princess' name is the Ranee of Surajapore, the state of India from which Nancy Haverfield comes. Indeed, I am told that the palace of the Rajah, her husband, is but a few miles distant from the village where Nancy spent her childhood. We think that it is thus in our power to afford to the Ranee a very interesting link with her distant home, and for that reason I propose to take the somewhat unusual step of allowing a new girl, Nancy Haverfield, to present the bouquet. I cannot give you full details at present, and also I fear I ought not to keep you longer from your tea and games. Dismiss, all."

She turned sharply, and, followed by the Staff, left the gymnasium—a babel of conversation breaking out among the girls as soon as the door closed behind her.

Indignation ran high at the honour done to Nancy in allowing her to present the bouquet to the Princess. The Seniors, cloaking their feelings as best they could, walked off sullenly to prepare for tea, but the Junior and Middle Schools aired their opinions with considerable vigour.

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"What a horrid shame!"

"Shame? It's worse than that; it's a crying disgrace. There won't be any holding that girl now. She's bad enough as it is!"

"She's awfully conceited, and this will make her hold her head higher than ever."

"I suppose Miss Primrose forgets that she's really in disgrace. It's a jolly fine thing if a girl can go down to that beach in defiance of orders and cause heaps of trouble by nearly getting drowned, and nothing be said about it, beyond kow-towing to her like this."

"She's not over straight, either. Look how she hung back over that inkpot episode—and deprived us all of a dance. I don't regard her as a good specimen of a St Hilda's girl to put forward."

Pamela, on a round of window-closing, stopped suddenly and faced the angry group.

"We all have our faults," she observed quietly, "but whatever Nancy Haverfield's are, crookedness and conceit are certainly not among them. In some respects she is perhaps a better specimen of the ideal St Hilda's is supposed to aim at than some others I could name."

After which Parthian shot she marched away down the passage.

Patty whistled inelegantly. "Well I never! And that's our quiet Pamela! She *has* got it badly!"

Ting! Ting! The examiner's bell sounded thinly

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from across the passage, and almost simultaneously Iris Phillips, the last of the Higher Division candidates, her ordeal over, re-entered the waiting-room. Miss Jevons, who was acting as 'marshal,' laid down her needlework and consulted the list at her elbow.

"That ends the Higher Division," she remarked. "The examiner will want the Lower Division candidates almost at once. Let me see. Who goes first? H—Nancy Haverfield, it's you, my dear. Come over here by the door. I should take that bracelet off. You can leave it with me. It is strange you are the first on the list, and yet the youngest in your division. All the more honour for you if you get the prize Mr Copping always gives for the highest result in each division."

She drew the child nearer to herself, talking gaily to set her more at her ease. Miss Jevons, in spite of her grim exterior, was very tender-hearted, and during the painful time of waiting she had been unable to shut her eyes to the persistent neglect which had been Nancy's lot at the hands of all the other candidates. Withdrawing into a corner, they had managed to frustrate all Pamela's moves in Nancy's direction, and had spent the time in laughing, teasing, and exchanging wishes for "Good luck." Nancy, left severely alone, had turned her attention to her music, fixing her eyes on one or two difficult bars in the studies, and mentally practising them for the last time.

At last the bell sounded again, and Nancy rose,

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crossed the hall and tapped at the door of the dreaded apartment. On being bidden to enter, she was seized with such overwhelming nervousness that for a moment she was unable to move. Then the examiner spoke again, and with a desperate effort Nancy pulled herself together and opened the door.

Later, in describing her adventures to her mother, Nancy wrote: "It wasn't very bad, Mums, really. Sir Martin was a dear old man and he talked to me, quite a lot. He said one of his grand-daughters is called Nancy. He asked me lovely scales, and turned over for me every time. There was one place I dreaded most of all, but as he did the turning over I got through it safely, I think. It only lasted a quarter of an hour altogether. I do hope I've passed. We shall get the results in ten days, Miss Primrose thinks."

"Miss Primrose wants everybody in the gym. after morning school."

Thus Helen Martyn, going the rounds of the classrooms, "gathering the clans," as the Juniors called it.

In the Fourth, excitement ran high. Angela shut her desk with a bang, "Oh, goody! That's the exam. results out! Hurry, you others. Quick, quick! Oh, what thrills!"

The news had run round the School like wildfire that the results were out, and the gymnasium was crowded with an eager throng of chattering girls. Miss Primrose, entering with a letter in her hand,

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called at once for silence and put a merciful end to the suspense.

"I have here," she began, "the results of the music examinations. They are at once highly gratifying and very disappointing. The results, in the various divisions, are very mixed, and there are one or two things which puzzle us very much. I will refrain from comment as I know you are anxious to hear what I have to tell you. The maximum, as you know, is 150—100 being required for a pass and 130 for honours. The list is as follows: Primary Division, Barbara Golding, pass, 118 marks, Mary Nelson, pass, 110 marks. Alison Gower, I am sorry to say, has failed, 97 marks. Elementary Division, Joyce and Dorothea have both passed; strangely enough both with 121 marks. Higher Division, Iris Phillips, pass, 113 marks. All passes, I am glad to say, are 'safe' passes. Daphne Heritage and Mollie Newbery, fail, 90 and 92 marks respectively. You will observe that I have left the Lower Division until the last. It is here that we find at once our highest glory and our deepest shame. Of five candidates sent in, four have failed: Pamela Hayman, 99 marks, Patty Thornton, 94 marks, Rotha Holland, 90, Angela King, 82. Pamela Hayman's failure is what Mr Copping describes as 'a splendid failure,' and he attributes it solely to nervousness—no very serious crime in anyone. The other failures we are all utterly at a loss to understand; they appear to cover the entire Fourth, with the one exception I have yet

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to mention. All are girls of excellent ability and well up to the age standard, and it seems a strange thing that St Hilda's should have to look to a new girl, incidentally, I am told, the youngest in her division, for the highest honour the school has ever won." She referred again to the paper she held. "Nancy Haverfield, pass with honours, 148 marks!"

In that moment, Nancy attained at once her greatest heights and greatest depths. For the sullen silence that followed Miss Primrose's announcement was broken only by the loyal handclap of one friend—who was herself nothing better than "a splendid failure"—Pamela Hayman, with tears standing in her gentle blue eyes.

CHAPTER XII

The Mystery Solved

NANCY never learned the exact truth of what took place in the gymnasium that morning, after Mr Copping, at a sign from the Principal, stepped forward and led the little girl out into the garden. From ill-suppressed rumours during the days that followed, she gathered that those who remained behind went through an unpleasant quarter of an hour.

She was a prey to mixed feelings as she followed the gentle old Music Master across the hall, and out on to the sunny lawn. Happy triumph at the thought of the glorious news she would have to tell her parents, and of how proud and happy they would be, alternated with a curious, dull, cold feeling when her mind reverted to 'the others.'

Mr Copping, having found a garden-seat, drew the little girl down beside him, and peered at her short-sightedly through his big spectacles.

"Well, little woman, this is splendid! I had a strong presentiment that you would do well, but you have surprised even me."

Nancy raised her head, hardly knowing whether to smile or cry. Mr Copping was chary of praise at the best of times, and in normal circumstances Nancy's

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pleasure at receiving this much commendation would have been great. Now, however, a recollection of that dreadful scene in the gymnasium swept over her and she trembled violently.

"It—it was dreadful!" she whispered at length.
"Oh, what have I done to make them hate me like that?"

Nancy afterward told her father that she was quite sure Mr Copping must have had a little girl of his own, "at some time anyhow," or else he would never have known how to be so nice to her on that dreadful day.

"You see," she explained, "I felt so queer. I didn't know myself whether I was happy or not, so how could he? And I couldn't explain what it was that made the girls so funny, so he must have been still more in a hole." Be that as it may, it was not long before the fatherly old man had obtained from Nancy the little that she herself knew of the motive of the School for its strange behaviour. In a few more minutes he had his little pupil laughing heartily at some queer anecdotes of his own student days in Germany, and when he left her, to go to dinner in Miss Primrose's sitting-room, Nancy bade him good-bye and tripped across the lawn as if she had not a care in the world.

Indeed, after that morning it did appear as though the climax was over, for whether as a result of certain pointed remarks from Miss Primrose, or not, the behaviour of the rest of the School altered, insomuch

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that the girls condescended to the point of being coldly polite and no more. But poor lonely Nancy felt that even that was something to be thankful for.

In leisure hours she gradually adopted the habit of working hard in her little garden, and it was while pulling off dead sweet-peas one day that she suddenly heard Miss Primrose call her from the other side of the privet hedge. Running round to the other side, she found the Principal, clad in the old black coat whose acquaintance the reader has already made, busily tying up rose-trees.

"I thought I could see you through the hedge," she called out as Nancy approached. "Do you know where my little pruners live?"

"I don't think I do, Miss Primrose."

"Well I will tell you, and you shall fetch them for me. You see the window of the Second Form room?"

"Yes, Miss Primrose."

"There is a flight of steps outside that window, leading to the tool-house underneath. It's the bigger of the two doors at the bottom of the steps, and you will have to pull the door instead of pushing it, for it opens outward. My little pruners are hanging at the right-hand end of the shelf, at the back of the tool-house, opposite the door. Do you think you could find them?"

"I think so, Miss Primrose."

Nancy stepped neatly over Miss Primrose's garden-

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ing basket, and tripped down the path, up the steps, and on to the terrace. The Second Form classroom was the end one on the ground floor on this side of the house, and Nancy easily found the narrow flight of steps, cleverly concealed by a row of low, thick bushes.

"What a queer little door," she reflected, as she paused at the top of the flight. "How funny I never noticed it before. I expect that's where they turn off the water, or something like that. It's not as tall as I am. Miss Primrose said the bigger door. It looks rather a heavy one."

In the steps lay a garden broom, having apparently fallen from the top of the wall. Nancy picked it up and stood it, head downward, on one of the steps, its handle leaning against the side of the house. The tool-house door proved to be less heavy than it looked, strengthened though it was by two massive-looking cross-pieces. Nancy stood on the threshold for a moment, striving to accustom her eyes to the gloom and then moved forward. Ah yes, there were the shelves; the pruners would be at the right-hand end. She had just found them and unhooked them from their nail when there was a bang behind her, followed by a curious rattling sound, and the tool-house was plunged in darkness. Nancy moved forward, groping her way toward the door. After a moment she could see the daylight shining through the crack beneath it.

"Wind blew it to, I expect," she reflected, slipping

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the pruners into her pocket, that she might have both hands free. "What a nuisance! Miss Primrose will be thinking I am very slow." A moment later annoyance gave place to fear as she discovered, to her dismay, that the door would not open more than an inch. An instant's reflection convinced her of the fact that the broom she had seen in the steps was the cause of her trouble, having fallen against the door, and wedged itself there—the head in the angle of the step, and the handle under the cross-piece on the door. Indeed, the rattling sound, which was repeated whenever she moved the door, left no doubt as to the identity of the queer 'key' that was holding her a prisoner.

Having shouted loudly and pounded on the door, all to no purpose, Nancy began to be a prey to wondering what Miss Primrose would think when she did not return with the pruners. That lady having been summoned to the house almost immediately to entertain a caller, took no further thought for her little messenger, beyond assuming that, finding her gone, Nancy would probably put the pruners in the basket and return to her own garden.

"What shall I do now?" thought Nancy, having abandoned all hope of getting out by the door, or of making someone hear. "If I were tall enough, I'd bang on the ceiling, and perhaps they'd hear me in the Second Form room. Oh, dear, Miss Primrose, I do hope you're not feeling very cross with me, for it's not my fault, really it isn't."

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Leaving her place by the door, Nancy began a journey of exploration round her pitchy-black prison, chiefly in the hope of finding some long-handled garden tool, with which to pound on the ceiling and attract attention. More than once her head, elbows or shins came into sharp contact with invisible, though none the less hard, articles, whose identity she could not always determine. At length, just as she had decided to turn back, fearful of being unable to find the door again if she wandered too far into the recesses of the cellar, her right hand touched the rusty lock of a small door. Feverishly she felt for the handle. It was locked. No matter. Back went the groping hands to the lock again, where she remembered having felt a key. The lock was rather stiff, but in the end Nancy came off victor, and the door swung back. For a moment she blinked her eyes at the sudden light, though it was by no means strong. Apparently the cellars ran right under the great house and the door in the tool-house communicated with this larger cellar—a whitewashed room lit by a tiny window high up in one side, and at present used as a store-room for a great many sacks of potatoes. In the opposite wall was another door, which on being pushed yielded readily to the touch. With a gasp Nancy fell back a pace, astonished at the scene before her.

The cellar was of similar size to the one she had just quitted, and in ordinary circumstances would probably boast of a similar amount of light. Now,

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however, it was flooded with light from two electric lamps hanging from the ceiling. Down the centre of the room ran a long table, covered with chemical apparatus in orderly confusion. At one end of the table, stirring some dark fluid in a porcelain dish stood—Miss Harrington!

The door had opened silently, but at the surprising scene which met her eyes, Nancy had been unable to suppress an exclamation of astonishment. Miss Harrington raised her head, and for quite a moment she stood silent, regarding the intruder with an expression of blank amazement on her pretty, flushed face. Indeed, during those first moments, it would have been hard to say which of the two looked more surprised.

Miss Harrington was the first to recover. Laying down her glass stirring-rod, she moved a step or two in the direction of Nancy's doorway.

"Why, it's Nancy Haverfield! What in the name of all that's extraordinary are you doing there?"

Nancy drew a quick breath, and her words tumbled out in the intensity of her desire not to be thought an eavesdropper.

"I got shut in, Miss Harrington. I was doing my garden, and Miss Primrose called me and asked me to get her little pruners from the tool-house. While I was in there, a broom fell against the door outside, and jammed it shut. I shouted ever so, but no one seemed to hear. Then by accident I found another

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way out, into that potato place and so here. The tool-house is next but one to this. I'm sorry I didn't knock on that door, but I didn't dream there'd be anyone here."

"Evidently not. I suppose now you are wondering what I am doing here, and what all this is."

Nancy nodded, her lips parted and eyes aglow with interest.

"Well, I'll tell you, to keep you from talking. All this is a great secret, you see. No one knows it but Miss Primrose, who gave me authority to use this room as a laboratory. I come here most nights."

"So that's what the light means," muttered Nancy, half unconsciously.

"The light? Have you seen it then?"

Nancy coloured. "Yes, the night Roger howled."

"Oh, I see. Well, if I explain to you what I am doing, you must tell no one, for Miss Primrose wishes my work to remain a great secret till it is finished."

"I wouldn't tell for the world. But I guess the others would love to know."

"The others?"

"Yes, the rest of the Fourth. They've all seen it, and they'd love to know what it means. I hear them whispering about it sometimes. This is under the Third Form room, isn't it? They're always trying to find out how you get in. I'd never have guessed it was this way."

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Miss Harrington smiled. "Oh, I don't come the way you did. If I did, I should be as much a prisoner as you are at the moment. Instead of which, I propose to show you my way out, if you will promise not to give away my hiding-place."

Nancy promised readily, and the Science Mistress then took her the round of the table, explaining in her interesting fashion the object of the work she was doing. Finally, she opened a small door and led the way up a narrow flight of steps. At the top of this stood another door which Miss Harrington unlocked with a small key.

"There, you see we are in the Staff sitting-room. You know your way to Miss Primrose's room from here, do you not? For I think you ought to go and explain to her why you have been so long fetching her pruners. She is probably scouring the house by now, or thinking of telling the police!"

Nancy sped away, the precious pruners clasped tightly in her hand. In the hall she met the object of her search, who laughed heartily at the account of Nancy's adventures. But when the little girl came to tell of how she got out from her prison, Miss Primrose grew serious and added her own injunctions of secrecy to those of Miss Harrington.

"You will all probably know of it by the end of the term," she concluded, "but until then we will let Miss Harrington continue her work undisturbed."

"So that is the mystery," reflected Nancy, as she

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wended her way to the Blue dormitory, "solved at last. It's rather a pity I can't tell the others; it might make them like me a bit." A wistful expression stole over the small face. "They worried enough about it," she finished sagely. "I'm not at all sure that the disappointing exam. results were not somehow connected with the mystery of the Third Form room."

CHAPTER XIII

The Priory Match

THE following girls have been chosen to play for St Hilda's in the match for the Ashcombe Shield on July 9th: Iris Phillips, Cecily Bartholomew, Jean Lester, Winifred Selwood, Betty Fox-Andrews and Angela King. The whole School will be present at the match.

Such was the notice posted in the recreation-room at St Hilda's one afternoon which attracted considerable attention throughout the School. Two members of the Sixth, Jean Lester and Priscilla Bassett, paused to read it on their way to preparation. The latter was comparatively new to St Hilda's, having entered the School only the term before. She read the notice aloud and turned to her companion.

"Oh, you're playing. Good old Jean; I felt sure you'd be chosen. I say, what a queer thing! Five Sixth Form girls and one from the Fourth. However did Angela King get chosen?"

"Haven't you seen her play? No, of course you haven't, or you wouldn't ask that question. She's splendid. I should say she might be champion of the School in a year or so. Her parents are both first-class players and Angela has had professional

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coaching almost ever since she could toddle. It's about her strongest point. A good many people think she may be a shining light at Wimbledon sometime in the future."

During the days that followed the publication of the names of the chosen six, preparations for the great match went on apace. Each afternoon, the team, armed with rackets and shoes, packed into motor-cars and travelled the two miles to Ashcombe to play practice sets on the Club courts in readiness for the match. Daphne, returning from her music-lesson one morning, almost ran into Miss Primrose, who, with Miss Franklynn and Miss Jevons, was making plans for the day's proceedings.

"The opening ceremony is timed for 2.30," Miss Primrose was saying, "so we shall all have to be there by 2.15 or thereabouts. The Committee wish the match to start at 3. I think the maids might lock up the house after we are gone and be free for the afternoon, as we are not likely to be back till 6 or 7 o'clock."

Ashcombe, where the match was to be played, was a small modern town, to the building and planning of which its chief landowner, Colonel Ashcombe, had devoted much assistance, both material and otherwise. Indeed, it was from him that the young township had taken its name. Some years before, he had presented for competition between St Hilda's and St Margaret's Priory, a convent school in Ashcombe, a

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silver shield to be known as the Ashcombe Tennis Shield, and played for annually by three couples from each school. The match, which was always a great social event in the neighbourhood, bade fair on this occasion to be of greater brilliance and importance than ever, owing to the combination of the match with the opening of the new Pleasure Park at Ashcombe.

It seemed to the impatient enthusiasts at St Hilda's, as if the great day would never dawn. At last, however, the slow intervening days had all been crossed off by Barbara Golding on the big calendar in the Junior recreation-room, and the 9th dawned, an ideal day for the decision of great issues on the courts.

School that day was well-nigh impossible; indeed, it was mercifully brought to a close an hour earlier than usual to allow of a twelve o'clock lunch. The team, clad in spotless white, each member attended by an admiring Junior, unofficially 'fagging' her racket and shoes, departed first; followed by car after car of excited girls, and lastly, by one containing the Staff, into whose charge the precious bouquet for the Princess had been confided.

The new Pleasure Park at Ashcombe presented a very gay picture in the afternoon sunlight, as the party from St Hilda's turned in at its wide gates. A dais, from which the opening ceremony was to be performed, had been erected under some tall trees, with rows of chairs for the spectators arranged on

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three sides of a square in front of it. One side of the square was already occupied by the girls from the Priory School, in charge of a small army of mistresses and two lay-sisters from the convent. In the background, a handful of stewards, recruited from the ranks of the Ashcombe Tennis Club, were putting the finishing touches to the courts, arranging the lofty seats for the umpires, and measuring the height of the nets. Miss Primrose and her party were given places on the side of the square opposite to that occupied by the girls from the Priory. Taking the bouquet in her hand, Miss Primrose passed down the long line of chairs in search of Nancy, to whom she committed the care of her precious burden and returned to her seat.

"I wish it was over," whispered Nancy to Pamela, as the Headmistress turned away.

"It won't begin yet," was the reply. "There's been a hitch. I heard a man talking about it as we came in. It seems Colonel Ashcombe has been staying at Penzance and was motoring here this morning. His car broke down miles from anywhere and he's only just reached Ashcombe Park, so he is expected to be rather late. Of course they can't begin without him, so they are rushing a band out from Newton Abbot to keep the people quiet till he gets here."

Meanwhile, at the other end of the line, the Staff was discussing the School's chance of success in the match.

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"I think we should do well," Miss Windsor was saying. "We have a younger team as a whole than we had last year, it is true; but three of them, Iris Phillips, Cecily Bartholomew, and Angela King have played in the match before, Iris and Angela twice and Cecily once. It will be a great thing for St Hilda's if we come off victorious for the third time in succession, and so win the shield outright. Angela and Iris together should prove a formidable pair. Iris has a splendid service, but Angela is excellent in every way and a tower of strength. But, dear me, what is the matter there? I hope nothing is wrong."

For Angela King, with white face, and trembling hands, had burst through the line of chairs and placed herself before Miss Primrose, holding out her tennis-racket, its handle broken raggedly off at the shoulder.

"Miss Primrose! What shall I do? Barbara Golding was carrying my racket, and she tripped over one of the ropes of the tea-tent, and fell on it and broke it. Oh, what shall I do? What *shall I do?*"

Miss Primrose had risen, her face full of concern, to examine the ruined racket.

"My dear child, how very unlucky! But is there no one in the Tennis Pavilion who can lend you another racket? You must not allow yourself to get upset and unfit to play."

Helen's voice spoke from behind the next row of chairs.

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"The Secretary is here, Miss Primrose, and she has offered to lend Angela her own racket."

"Oh, no, Miss Primrose," sobbed Angela. "I couldn't! It's very kind, but really I can't play with a strange racket. I'd lose my head at once. I have another racket at school, my last season's one. Couldn't I go back and fetch it? Oh, please let me! It's quite a good one, and it would make all the difference to my play."

Miss Primrose consulted her watch and shook her head regretfully.

"I'm afraid you can't do that. It is already past the time fixed for the opening ceremony, and you could not possibly be missing when you were wanted to begin the match. It is very bad luck, but I'm afraid you must use Miss Frensham's racket, and make the best of a bad job. Sit here by me for the present and dry your eyes. Try to forget about the match and do your best when the time comes. You see, it is nearly two miles to St Hilda's, and I have sent away the motor-cars, so there would be no hope of getting your racket through in time. I should think the Ranee and her party would be here at any moment. They are already overdue."

Miss Primrose, who knew nothing of the delay caused by the breakdown of Colonel Ashcombe's car, turned to Helen.

"See if you can find Miss Frensham, Helen. Thank her for her offer, and say I shall be most

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obliged if she will lend her racket. Now, Angela, do not cry any more. Apparently the band is going to play, so dry your eyes and listen. The match is not lost yet by any means."

The news of the accident had run through the ranks of St Hilda's like fire through straw.

"That's good-bye to the match," gasped Patty. "I heard Miss Christopher say she hoped Angela would be in tiptop form, as she was our main hope. She said the rest of the team were not to be told, though. Isn't it just our luck? I wish girls could swear; I'd like to say something desperate. It's a shame Prim won't let her other one be sent for."

"Her other what?" queried Joyce.

"Her last season's racket. She'll never be able to play with a strange one; you know what she is. But her last season's racket is in her locker. I s'pose she wasn't to know this would happen, but it does seem a shame she didn't bring it as well. However, I s'pose we'd better make up our minds to grin and bear it. The match is as good as lost."

"We'd have kept the shield this time, wouldn't we, if we'd won it?"

"Yes. Oh, it is sickening luck."

Nancy, concealed till the right minute in the back row with her big bouquet, sat listening to the conversation with a thumping heart. In spite of the discouraging behaviour of the rest of the school, she had embraced with characteristic whole-hearted-

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ness the interests and aims of St Hilda's in work and play. Already, in her mind, there was no school in the world like St Hilda's, and with all the enthusiasm of her fiery nature she longed ardently to see 'her' school come out on top, in every sphere. It had been a wonderful privilege to win so great an honour as her musical success so early in her school career, and a high honour to be chosen on this great occasion to stand forth as the representative of her beloved school and make the presentation of the bouquet to the Ranee. During the past days the whole of Nancy's small soul had been filled with a keen longing to see the school come out victorious in this, the first match at which she had been present. Great things were at stake: the honour of the school in the eyes of that brilliant representative gathering of onlookers, and not the least—the retention for all time of the Ashcombe Shield, if only it could be won just this once more. And now, through an unlucky accident, the finest player in the team, the brightest hope of her side, had been prevented from playing her best, and the match, according to the opinion of girls who knew, was as good as lost. Nancy grew hot all over at the very thought. What mattered it that the victim of the unlucky accident was Angela herself—who had persistently refused to be friendly, and for whom she had risked her life and received not even a smile of gratitude? The rest of the school, too, was made up of girls who had treated her with an un-

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yielding and inexplicable neglect, which had become much worse since Pamela had innocently disclosed the fact that Nancy had solved the mystery of the Third Form room, and from which even the studied politeness of the last few days was but a poor relief. But outweighing all this was the thought that the school, the inner self of the school—its very spirit—would suffer, and not so much the girls who made up its numbers. Personal considerations faded into the background before this dreadful thought. Unseeingly Nancy stared before her. A couple of men in green baize aprons were hastily arranging an extra row of chairs to accommodate the ever-increasing crowd.

"Hurry up there," muttered the first. "Don't hang back so. There's time to put in twenty rows if need be. Colonel can't be here for a 'alf-hour yet."

The sound of his voice stirred Nancy's dazed brain into action.

"Did you hear that?" she whispered, nudging Pamela's arm with a shaking hand.

"Yes. Isn't it a nuisance? I'm getting so bored."

Nancy sat forward eagerly in her chair.

"Why, Pam, it's our only chance! Oh, why doesn't Prim let someone fetch that other racket? We mustn't lose this match! Do you think she knows there's going to be a delay? Surely she can't know, can she?"

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"Oh, I expect she does. It's a long way back to school, you know, and no one would ever do it in time."

For one moment Nancy sat silent, frenzied calculations chasing one another through her brain. "Half an hour," the man had said, and it was nearly two miles to St Hilda's. Why, she could easily do it! How stupid not to have thought before! She could engage the car that had brought them over and pay the man at the other end for the double journey. In the excitement of the great idea thoughts of possible consequences did not enter her head. That it was an unheard-of thing for any St Hilda's girl to take so much upon herself unbidden did not occur to her for one moment. Touching Pamela's arm again, she leaned forward, speaking rapidly in a low tone.

"Pam! Here, take these flowers. I'm going to find the man with the car, and get him to drive me back to school for Angela's racket. I'm sure I can do it in time. But just in case I don't; when they come, you must lie low till the last minute. The bouquet has to be given right at the end of the Ranee's speech. Get up and take it to her yourself. Here are the words you have to say. You can easily learn them, and no one would dare to stop you. But I'm sure to be back in time."

Pamela, white to the lips, shook her head agitatedly and a flood of protest rose to her lips.

"Nancy, I couldn't! I'm much too nervous.

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Besides, Miss Primrose will be dreadfully angry. Oh, Nancy, don't ! I——"

But Nancy was gone. Two strides across the lawn and she had gained the shelter of some friendly bushes, leaving Pamela in charge of the big bouquet, with a wish in her loyal but frightened soul that the earth would open and swallow her up.

CHAPTER XIV

Nancy Makes Good

OUTSIDE in the road, Nancy looked hastily this way and that. Two deserted private cars and a heavy motor-cycle leaning against a lamp-post alone remained of the medley of wheeled traffic of all descriptions through which the girls had had to thread their way into the grounds. The little girl's heart gave a great leap of disappointment. For one instant she stood irresolute, surveying the deserted road with tear-filled eyes. But it was only for an instant. A moment later the fighting spirit of generations of bygone Haverfields rose within her.

"I'll walk!" she muttered through set teeth, "or rather, I s'pose I'll have to run. If I'm not back in time to give the bouquet I may manage it in time for the match. I will! I'll go the short cut over the fields and run every bit of the way, and then I'll get out my bike, and fly back like the wind. There'll be a row I guess—but it's worth it if we win."

At the corner of the road stood a couple of errand-boys, swinging their baskets and gossiping. Nancy indicated the gate leading to the path across the fields.

"That path goes to Lexfield, doesn't it?"

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The bigger of the two boys swung round with a grin.

"No, missie, it don't. It stops where it be. But you'll get there all right if you goes that way."

"It's quicker'n the road," added the other boy, and without waiting to reply Nancy scrambled over the gate, regardless of her white frock and thin stockings, and tore across the first field. For the first half-mile the way was easy, and Nancy made good pace. But the day was a hot one, and after the first few fields the going became very difficult. Stiles and barbed-wire fences appeared as if expressly to annoy the eager young traveller, and the trees which had thrown their grateful shade over the first portion of the way, came to an end. Running across the heavy ground of a ploughed field, sticky and slippery from having been recently turned up, Nancy glanced at her watch.

"This far in ten minutes," she panted. "Guess I'm about half-way there. It's a mercy the church tower is in front to guide me. I s'pose I'll have to put on clean shoes to come back, if I can make time."

Stopping not to consider the farmer's feelings, she took a short cut through the farmyard at Rookery Farm, the first house in Lexfield. Ducks and chickens scattered noisily in all directions before the flying white-clad figure. Panting and gasping, Nancy raced across the village green, past the tiny post office and the Inn yard, and up the long hill to the school.

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Having come by the short cut she was approaching St Hilda's from the rear. Suddenly a bright thought flashed through her mind.

"Over the wall into 'Woodlands,'" she grunted, "and across the tennis-courts. Good. Much the quickest way."

The wall, however, proved an enemy rather than a friend. As Nancy afterwards phrased it: "His sides were too slippy, and his top was too jaggy." Be that as it may, Nancy descended on the other side with a large hole in the knee of one stocking, and minus her left shoe—that article of apparel having jammed itself between two large stones on the top of the wall, utterly refusing to be moved.

"I shall certainly have to put on clean shoes to go back," she reflected ruefully, "time or no time."

Scrambling up the terrace with a fine disregard for flower-beds, Nancy made for the door usually used by the girls. To her dismay it was locked. A hasty inspection of the south side of the house showed her that the front door was similarly bolted and barred. Surely the maids could not have gone out already! Ah, joy! There was a side door open! Nancy flew through it, down the passage and out into the court-yard at the back. Games materials not in constant use were kept in an extra set of lockers ranged round the walls of a large loft known as the 'Games-room' above the bicycle-house which opened into the court-yard. Up the narrow steps into the loft went Nancy, climbing like a cat. *Phew!* It was hot! Another

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glance at her watch told her that it was over twenty minutes since she had left Ashcombe.

"I shall never be in time for the opening," she thought desperately as she began to rummage in Locker 32 for Angela's racket. A hasty examination proved that the strings were all in good condition.

"Now for a pair of shoes and my bike," muttered Nancy. "How my foot aches, and what holes in my heel! But there's no time to change. Good gracious! I'm sure that door was open when I came in. Surely no one would lock me in!"

Outside in the road the maids, armed with needle-work and knitting, were setting off for an afternoon by the sea. Bessie, in the act of closing the gate, paused suddenly.

"I forgot to lock the bicycle-house," she announced. "I shall have to go back."

"No, I locked it," called Alice from the other side of the road. "I chanced to be out there. It's all right. Come along."

So away they went down the road, utterly unconscious that the door of the said bicycle-house was at that moment being vigorously rattled by the hand of a small, tearful girl, bearer for the time being of the destiny of the Ashcombe match.

"Locked in!" sobbed Nancy. "Just when I'd got the racket. The maids must have gone out. What *shall* I do? What *shall* I do?"

She looked wildly round the bicycle-house, and

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then with a suddenness that was surprising, the sobs ceased, and the dark head was thrown back determinedly. Two minutes later, racket in hand, the small prisoner was back in the games-loft. Throwing open the doors of a succession of lockers, one above the other, she scrambled up the rough ladder thus formed, and crawled along the top of the range of lockers. At the end of the loft was a large skylight, which by dint of some considerable pushing she at length succeeded in opening. It was the work of a moment to place the racket on the flat roof outside, and to swing herself through the skylight. Forgetful of her white dress she scurried across the roof, and scrambled in at a window, that of the Kindergarten, which Nancy knew was next door to the laboratory, and opened out of it. But she was destined to another check. Miss Harrington, always anxious as to the welfare of the precious apparatus of the laboratory, had locked the door of her little kingdom on the outside. Through the keyhole Nancy could see the key sticking in the lock. For a moment she was tempted to give up the attempt, and then just as she was turning away came The Great Idea.

The Wireless!

An instant later she was on her knees before the instrument. How fervently, as she opened its rose-wood case, did she bless her knowledge of Morse-code and Miss Harrington's kindly permission to send messages to Dick under supervision.

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"This isn't 'under supervision,'" she reflected as she screwed the knob on to the Morse key, "but I can't help it. I hope to goodness he's there!"

For Nancy's daring plan was none other than to call up Dick, and send him with the racket on his bicycle.

Feverishly she worked the Morse key, and in a second the message was spreading out into space.

Dick Drury! Dick Drury! Come to St Hilda's at once! I want you! Nancy Haverfield.

Over and over again she tapped out the message, fearing to stop lest she should miss the chance of making Dick hear. The precious minutes flew by and still the small girl sat at the instrument. Suddenly a shower of stones rattled on the window at her back. Nancy flew across the room and looked out. Down on the terrace stood Dick, panting and dishevelled.

"Whatever's up?" he called out. "I came over the wall. Is it a flood or a fire?"

"Neither. I came back from the match to fetch this racket, and while I was getting it I got locked in. Listen, do you know Angela King?"

"Yes."

"This is her racket. If she doesn't get it we shall lose the match. Get your bicycle and fly off to Ashcombe Pleasure grounds and give her this racket. Look out! I've found a piece of string and I'm going to let it down."

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She stopped from sheer lack of breath, and the astonished Dick ventured on a mild expostulation.

"Fancy you daring to come all that way ——"

"Shut up. Here comes the racket. There's no time to chatter. The match will have started by this time. Oh, do hurry! We can't let the school lose."

"No, all right, I'll go," said Dick submissively. "But, I say, weren't you to present a bunch of flowers or something? Tell you what—Dad's home, and I'll ask him to whisk you over in the car. He'll soon get you out of that with a ladder. Cheerio, kid. Don't worry. I'll be there in two ticks on my bike."

He picked up the racket, cut the twine and was gone. Two minutes later Nancy saw him flying through the village as if pursued by a whole army of evil spirits.

"Have some lemonade, Jean?"

"No, thank you. I feel too blue to eat or drink. They're whacking us into fits."

"What are the games?"

"The total is 35, to our 21. I don't know the details. But we can never make it up."

The speakers were Jean Lester and Margery Bartholomew. The first half of the match was over, and it was now the interval for refreshments. The Priory team, flushed with the prospect of almost

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certain victory, was talking and laughing noisily at the next table. This circumstance did not, it was plain to be seen, tend to encourage the down-trodden St Hilda's team.

"Cheer up!" said Margery. "You may win yet. Let's get back to the courts."

"And so, Miss Primrose, I got her out by means of a ladder and brought her on in my car. I hope you do not mind, but I had to buy her a pair of shoes in the village. Poor little thing, she is very tired, and too frightened to face you. I hope my young son was in time with the racket."

Miss Primrose turned to Doctor Drury with a triumphant smile.

"Yes, I think he must have been. At any rate, that is the only way by which I can account for the changed fortunes of my team in the second half of the game. Dear little Nancy! How splendid of her to risk all that, and sacrifice her chance of presenting the bouquet! She has saved the match for St Hilda's. I must go and tell the girls."

"So you see, girls, you owe the match to Nancy. In spite of all those difficulties, she managed to attract the attention, by means of our wireless set, of Doctor Drury's son, and thus to get the racket—without which Angela certainly appeared to be playing very badly—through in time. Before you get into the cars I think you ought to——"

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But Miss Primrose was quite unable to finish her sentence, even if there had been any need to do so. For the applause, in shouts, clappings, and cheers, broke out in one overwhelming burst, and Nancy, standing by with shining eyes, came into her own at last.

CHAPTER XV

Flavia

LESSONS were over for the morning. In the Fourth classroom Miss Wentworth had sounded her bell, and picking up her books she left the room. It was the day after the match at Ashcombe, and the school was still quivering with excitement at the dramatic events of the day before. Sylvia Lambert, as the eldest girl in the Form, acted as spokeswoman.

"Nancy, we feel sure you don't like a lot of fuss, and we don't quite know how to say what we want to, but we are all dreadfully sorry to have been so unkind to you. I think we began to be in the wrong over that affair of your bracelet. Since then we've just got worse and worse. Yesterday you saved the match for St Hilda's and we didn't deserve it a bit. We want to thank you and apologize for our unkindness."

Nancy, her face flushing crimson, put her hand on Sylvia's arm.

"Oh, don't say that," she begged. "I hated your being cross with me, and I couldn't think why it was, but it's all right now, really it is. As for the bracelet affair, it was my fault as much as anyone's, and

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I ought to have owned up about the ink-stain, too."

"We haven't finished yet," went on Sylvia. "I'm speaking for the Incurables now, and I want to say that we think we've not behaved as we might in the dormitory. Next term we hope you'll be a lot happier than you must have been this term."

Nancy flashed her characteristic smile at the group around her.

"I shan't be here next term; I'm going to be a day girl. Perhaps it's as well, for you might end by making me conceited. I hate all this fuss. There's nothing to forgive, indeed there isn't. Let's change the subject."

"Well," suggested Patty, "will you tell us what is the real meaning of the mystery of the Third Form room? We are dying to know."

"Yes, do," begged Margery. "Just to show that we aren't in your bad books any longer."

Nancy's face fell. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she broke out. "I can't do that, really. I promised I wouldn't tell. But I think you'll all know about it before the end of term. You are certainly not in my bad books, though. It's lovely to be friends again."

Angela, who had hitherto remained silent, spoke suddenly.

"Don't worry her to tell. If she's promised, she must stick to her word, of course. I think I owe you a special bit of thanks, Nancy, for what happened yesterday, as well as at the picnic."

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Nancy put her fingers into her ears and laughed wickedly.

"If you don't stop making me blush," she declared, "I shall run away. Do change the subject, somebody."

"All right," interposed Patty. "I will. I've got some news. We're to be allowed to keep the Ashcombe Shield in the Fourth classroom for the first fortnight of next term."

"How do you know?" queried Rotha.

"Miss Harrington told me. It's supposed to be one week each for Angela and Nancy, because they helped us to win the match."

"I haven't seen the shield yet," remarked Nancy.
"Where is it?"

"We had it here all last term and the term before," was the reply. "But at the beginning of the Summer term it's always taken to Colonel Ashcombe's. Then after the match he gets the name of the winning school engraved on it, and takes it to the school's Prize-giving, and presents it. Our Prize-day is at the end of this term. Of course we keep the shield now, for good."

There was silence for a moment, broken at length by Nancy.

"I can't believe I've been here eight weeks, and that it's only three weeks to the end of term. I feel so excited."

"When are your father and mother coming home?" inquired Patty.

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"They've started, haven't they?" put in Margery.

"Oh, yes, long ago. They're due to land the day after to-morrow, and Miss Primrose says she expects they'll be here on Saturday. They are hurrying on here because Mums is very anxious to see the Ranee before she goes back to India."

"Oh, that reminds me," burst out Patty, "I've got some more news. Miss Primrose says Nancy is to be allowed to present the bouquet to"—she blushed and stopped for a scarcely appreciable moment—"to whoever gives away our prizes on Prize-day," she finished, somewhat lamely.

"Am I?" inquired Nancy, sublimely unconscious of her informer's embarrassment. "Why?"

"Oh, because you missed giving the other to the Ranee."

"What fun! I wonder who'll give away the prizes. Will it be Colonel Ashcombe?"

There was a universal laugh, and then Daphne spoke.

"Of course not! What use do you suppose a bouquet would be to him? He only presents his own shield. The school prizes proper are given away by some notable lady in the neighbourhood."

"Can we invite our parents?"

"Oh, yes. Or rather, Miss Primrose does that."

"Good. I shall want Mums to come, and Daddy and my new cousin."

Whereupon Patty blushed and dimpled again, and Daphne in great haste to prevent untimely dis-

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closures, jumped down from her perch on Sylvia's desk, exclaiming, "There's the lunch-bell. Do hurry, or we shall be late."

"Miss Primrose wants Nancy Haverfield in her room immediately after the first lesson this morning, and will be very glad if you will excuse her as soon as the bell sounds," announced Jean.

Miss Wentworth laid down her pen.

"Thank you, Jean. I think you might put away your books and go now, Nancy. I shall be sounding my bell in a moment."

Nancy rose in some wonderment, and putting away her books and writing materials left the classroom.

"I wonder what Miss Primrose wants me for," she mused, as she crossed the hall. "Perhaps it's to tell me I can wait here to-morrow for Mums and Daddy, instead of being fetched from tennis. I hope that's it. I'm sure I could never play sensibly if I was expecting them every minute. I'd be far too excited."

In answer to the small girl's knock on the study door the Principal's clear voice bade her enter. Nancy found Miss Primrose standing by the window, an open letter in her hand. She turned round as the child crossed the room.

"Nancy, dear, I have just received a letter from your mother, in which she says that she and your father propose to leave the boat at Plymouth, in order to get here more quickly."

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Nancy's face lighted up.

"Oh, Miss Primrose, how splendid! Then I shall see them quite early to-morrow, shan't I?"

Miss Primrose smiled indulgently and there was a twinkle in her eyes as she made her answer.

"I think perhaps if you could be very, very quick in getting ready, it might be managed even earlier than that—say this morning."

"Oh, Miss Primrose, how?"

"Very simply. If you will find your Matron and ask her to put out your things, and hurry into them as quickly as you can, so as to be ready in about ten minutes, Miss Franklyn will take you to Plymouth, and you will be able to meet your father and mother at the docks. This has had to be arranged in a great hurry, and of course quite without reference to your parents, but I think it will fit in very well, if only you can get ready quickly enough. Miss Franklyn is waiting for you in the office, and Jenkyn will drive you both to the station."

It is probable that at that moment the stately Principal of St Hilda's received the shock of her life, for the words had scarcely left her lips when two strong, young arms flew round her neck, and she felt her cheeks being covered with eager kisses, while a trembling voice nearly sobbed into her ear.

"Oh, Miss Primrose, Miss Primrose! How perfectly lovely of you! I can never thank you enough—never! I feel almost too excited to live!"

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Half an hour later the morning train steamed slowly out of the station at Netherstoke, on its way to Newton Abbott. As it made its way along the little branch line Nancy could not help reflecting upon the changed circumstances in which she had last made that same journey. Then she had been heartsore from the recent parting with her beloved mother, and from the prospect of so soon being left by her father among a great gathering of strangers for nearly three long months. Now, how different it all was! Every moment brought her nearer to her parents and the new little cousin, with whom so many future hours would be spent. A week ago, indeed, this fact would not have looked so bright, for she would have been forced to confess the unpleasantness of her relationship with the other girls. Since the day of the Ashcombe match, however, all this had been changed, and with her new-found happiness at school, and the great news of her success in the examination, which she would have to tell her parents, added to her natural delight at seeing them again after a long separation, it would have been difficult to find a happier girl than the one who on that sunny morning descended from the Netherstoke train at Newton Abbott.

Mercifully the travellers had but a short wait for the Plymouth train, which to Nancy's great delight proved to be an express.

"I'm glad of that for two reasons," she confided to Miss Franklyn as they took their places in the

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big corridor coach. " You see I feel so much better when we're rushing along very fast. When I'm awfully excited it seems dreadful to be stopping at a station every few yards. The other reason is that the sooner we get to Plymouth, the less risk there will be of missing Mums and Daddy. They don't know we're coming, so of course they wouldn't wait on the docks for us, and it would be dreadful if we got there too late, and found the ship in and Mums gone." Her face paled a little, and she added half in a whisper, " Then they'd go on to St Hilda's and find me not there."

Miss Franklynn smiled reassuringly. " I don't think you need worry about that. Lady Haverfield told Miss Primrose that the boat is not expected in till two o'clock. Even then she will have to wait for a tender to bring her passengers ashore, for you see she is bound for Southampton, so she will not come into Plymouth docks."

It seemed to the impatient Nancy as if the journey would never be over. At last, however, the train steamed into the great station of North Road, and it was here that the travellers partook of a hasty lunch before catching another train to Millbay, which, as Miss Franklynn explained, was the station for the docks.

On inquiry at the gates she was informed, much to Nancy's relief, that the s.s. *Niobe* was not yet due. The quayside was almost deserted, and at Nancy's suggestion the pair whiled away the time by strolling

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up and down the long stretch between the dock-gates and the lighthouse at the far end. At length the official to whom they had spoken at the gates was seen approaching them, picking his way among the now increasing crowd.

"If you come with me, missie," he began, "I can show you the tenders alongside the *Niobe*. She's just in."

Nancy and her companion followed the man to his small glass-roofed office, where, standing on a high chair, the small girl had a never-to-be-forgotten peep through a big telescope, affording a hazy view of a great grey shape far out at sea, with two fussy tenders bustling round the towering hull.

Then followed another long wait, which Nancy privately thought would never come to an end. Moment by moment she grew more and more impatient, and she well-nigh reached the depths of despair when Miss Franklyn touched her arm suddenly.

"Here is the first tender. You must do the looking out, remember, for I do not know your parents. Don't be disappointed if you cannot see them, for they may be on the second tender. Keep your eyes well open, and be ready to stop them from moving away and missing us in the crowd."

But there was no need for the last injunction. Nancy had long ago picked out the well-known figures, standing together on deck, mounting guard over a pile of luggage and a slim, black-clad girl of

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about her own age. A moment later the gangway was down, and with a glad cry of "Mummy, Mummy!" Nancy sprang forward. Sir Roden was the first to step ashore, and in one stride he reached his daughter, and lifted her, big girl as she was, shoulder-high in his strong arms.

"Good-bye, good-bye, Miss Franklynn. Lady Haverfield and I are very sorry you have to hurry back to St Hilda's. Very many thanks for bringing Nancy to meet us. We will deliver her safely at St Hilda's to-night, without fail."

The train steamed out, and Sir Roden, who had volunteered to see Miss Franklynn off in it, returned to the hotel where he had left his wife, and the two girls.

"Well, young lady," he cried gaily as he came in, "I believe you've grown, even in two months. This is your cousin Flavia, who tells me that in another two months you will have grown much in wickedness through her evil influence. However," he added with a mock sigh, "I'm afraid that's impossible. I fear you have reached the limit of wickedness; beyond which no amount of evil influence can draw you."

Nancy never forgot that wonderful afternoon in Plymouth.

Sir Roden and Lady Haverfield were both in merry mood, and the two girls speedily overcame their shyness. Soon the merry voices were raised

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in eager discussion of favourite books and hobbies.

"You play the violin? How splendid! Mr Copping says we want another violin in St Hilda's orchestra. Oh, by the way, you know you are coming to St Hilda's, don't you? Have you ever been to school before?"

"No, never. My father taught me all I know, and Stephen helped a bit sometimes. He could make me understand Greek translations better than my father somehow."

Nancy whistled. "Greek translations! Good gracious! We at St Hilda's will have to look to our laurels. Do you know French?"

"Only fairly well. I know Spanish best. My mother was Spanish, you see, and I was made to learn it for her sake. It is in games that you will find me the greatest duffer, I expect."

Nancy, watching the handsome dark face, over which the animated expressions chased each other in vivid interplay, privately thought that its owner was not likely to prove a duffer at anything for very long.

They were back at the hotel by now, after a tour of exploration round Plymouth. Suddenly the door opened to admit Sir Roden. There was a twinkle in his eye as he crossed the room to speak to his daughter.

"Nancy, there is a gentleman outside asking for you. Are you at home to visitors?"

Nancy stared. "A gentleman? I don't know any gentlemen! Are you sure it's for me?"

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Sir Roden pulled a melancholy face. "She doesn't know any gentlemen," he lamented. "What a blow for me! I am sorry to have disappointed you, Nancy."

"Why, you silly Daddy," cried Nancy. "You know what I mean, of course you do! But who can it be? The only gentlemen I know in England, besides you, of course, are Mr Copping and Doctor Drury."

"Well, what are we to do about it?"

"I—I don't know. Don't you know who it is?" Then there was a step in the passage, and Nancy looked for a moment with wide eyes. "Why—he's there behind you! Fancy you not knowing! It's Lieutenant Maynard, who taught me about the wireless!"

Later in the evening, as the whole party left the train at Netherstoke, the wonder was explained.

"I've got a year's leave from sailoring, you see," Lieutenant Maynard was saying. "As I have nowhere else to go just yet, your father very kindly asked me here, so I hope to have plenty of chance to teach you still more about wireless."

"So you knew all the time who 'the gentleman' was," cried Nancy, turning to her father. "How lovely of you to plan such a surprise for me! Dick will love to know a real naval officer. He's mad on the sea."

"Who's Dick," inquired Flavia.

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"The Doctor's son. He lives next door to St Hilda's. *Ow!* There are the lights of school. How dreadful to have to go back! This has been such a wonderful day."

Lady Haverfield laid a hand on the small shoulder.

"But there are many equally wonderful to-morrows in store," she remarked. "You must not forget that, girlie. To-morrow you have a holiday, and if Miss Primrose will allow it, you must come and see Prior's Mead."

Nancy sighed happily. "Yes," she whispered, "I'm not going to be silly. I don't mind going back, really. Nothing matters now that you are home at last."

CHAPTER XVI

Derek or Dick?

DURING the days following the return of Sir Roden and Lady Haverfield from Madeira, Nancy felt as if she was living in some wonderful dream. Contrary to every one's expectation she had begged to be allowed to spend the remaining fortnight of the term as a boarder at St Hilda's, stipulating as a condition that her mother was to ask Miss Primrose's permission to see her daughter as often as possible. Flavia, with whom Nancy had cemented a firm friendship, was inclined to be rather cast down at the thought that her lively young cousin would not yet be making her home at Prior's Mead.

"We shall hardly see anything of her, Auntie, I am sure," she lamented; "schools are dreadful places for being shut in. I've read about it in books."

But as events showed, Flavia's prognostications proved far worse than the reality. For Miss Primrose, on being approached in the matter, expressed herself as being "quite willing to stretch a point, just this once." But Sir Roden, in the days that followed, came to stating it as his opinion that the Principal had "stretched a good many points just this once." For, indeed, she proved herself extraordinarily lenient

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in the matter of leave granted, and it became quite a regular occurrence for Lady Haverfield, accompanied by Flavia, to make her appearance at St Hilda's as soon as afternoon school was over, and carry off her small daughter to Prior's Mead, where she was allowed to stay, provided her evening lessons were not neglected, till bedtime.

But as Nancy herself complained one afternoon to her father, that wasn't half time enough. It was not that she complained of Miss Primrose, but that there were so many new and wonderful things to be seen in her pretty home, that the bright summer evenings seemed all too short for the many visits of inspection that had to be made. Looking at the beautiful old house, and the fine stretch of orderly grounds around it, it was difficult to picture the scene of desolation which had confronted the new owners of Prior's Mead on the occasion of their first visit. Cartloads of weeds had been removed from the paths and flower-beds, and in their place gleamed brilliant masses of colour and neatly-trimmed clumps of shrubs. The house itself had been redecorated from garret to cellar, and Nancy was never tired of exploring its many wonders—the bright, stone-paved conservatory, with its waving palms and rare blooms—and the oak-panelled hall, with its sets of antlers, figures of knights in armour, and rows of portraits of dead-and-gone Haverfields. Upstairs were new glories at every turn—the book-lined library—the wonderful view across the park through the leaded

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windows of the old turret-room—the mysterious series of eerie-looking attics, filled with unwanted furniture of bygone days—and last, but not least, Nancy's own room, white-painted and daintily furnished, and fitted up with just the very books, pictures and ornaments that delight a girl's heart. Opening from it was another room, its twin in nearly every detail, which had been set apart for Flavia.

The two girls were examining the beauties of the latter room one evening, when Sir Roden called to them from the hall, asking them to join him in the garden. They obeyed with alacrity, for the garden was another wonder of which they never tired. The rose-garden was a blaze of colour and the lily-pond with its glittering family of goldfish, an unending source of delight. A new discovery of the day before was the maze, among whose high laurel hedges and neatly clipped arbours the pair had played hide-and-seek. Nancy had paid visits on the first day to the stables, where the hunters and riding-horses and the two little rough ponies for herself and Flavia had speedily won her heart. What new wonder could there be left to disclose?

Sir Roden Haverfield, accompanied by his wife and Lieutenant Maynard, was awaiting the girls on the terrace in front of the house.

"I've just heard that you have three wonders still undiscovered," he called out, as the children appeared in the doorway. "Which would you like

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to see first? One is in the stables, one in the house, and one down in the park."

"I vote for the park one first, now we're here," announced Nancy. "That is, if Flavia doesn't mind."

"No, of course I don't. We shall see them all in the end, shan't we, Uncle?"

Sir Roden laughed. "I hope so. But once you get attracted by anything, there's no moving you young people, and it's nearly supper-time now."

Nancy seized Flavia's arm and raced her unceremoniously down the steps.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry!" she cried. "What are we waiting for? We simply must see those three things before I have to go."

The party crossed the upper lawn and descended another flight of steps into the Dutch garden, already a charming picture, with its sundial, intersecting paths, and bird-bath, on the edge of which a group of noisy sparrows were disporting themselves. From here, a gate in the yew hedge led into the gently sloping grassland beyond, at the bottom of which flowed a broad, clear stream.

"There," said Sir Roden, from the bank, pointing with his whip to a neat white boat moored in the shallows, "that is Lieutenant Maynard's present to you. He vouches for the fact that the *Nancy*, as he has called her, is unsinkable, otherwise I should not have a peaceful moment after to-day. Here, be careful! If you both set upon the poor man like

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that, you will pull his head off, and effectively stop him from ever giving you anything else. Come, who will race me to the stables to see the second wonder?"

In an instant the pair were flying across the park in a plucky attempt to win the race. But in vain. Sir Roden had been a famous sprinter in his college days, and by the time the girls reached the stables they found him in conversation with one of the stable-boys. As they ran up, he laid his whip on a bench and preceded them into the harness-room.

"Here's a nurseryful of babies for you to play with on wet days, young lady," he said, with a playful pinch to Flavia's cheek, as he indicated a large basket on the floor in one corner.

Nancy moved forward and stood looking down at the six fat fox-terrier puppies, who were rolling and tumbling about over the back and legs of their comfortable-looking black-and-white mother.

"I never saw anything so sweet," she whispered at length. "Where *did* they all come from?"

"I thought they might appeal to you," said Sir Roden amusedly, "so I bought the whole bag of tricks this morning from a man in the village."

Flavia, turning to make some remark to Lieutenant Maynard, found that he had disappeared, and she commented on the fact to Sir Roden.

"I am not surprised at that," he replied, with mock severity. "You and Nancy between you nearly killed him down by the river. The third and last

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wonder is in one of the attics. I think if you want to get there to-night you had better come at once."

So up went the whole party to the top of the house, threading their way down a narrow passage to a door at the end, which opened to disclose Lieutenant Maynard himself, seated at a small table, before the finest wireless set Nancy had ever seen.

"So now you will be able to send messages to school when you are no longer a boarder," he explained. "You will have to take a few more lessons, just to improve your style and speed."

"I think it's all just wonderful, Mums darling," sighed Nancy a few days later. She was seated with her mother in the shade of some tall old trees on the lawn, watching the sunset as it glinted on the numerous windows of the old house, making the gilded weathercock above the turret shine like pure gold. From the other side of the trees came the sound of voices and laughter, as Dick and Flavia, already the best of friends, disported themselves in the big swing Sir Roden had just had erected. Up on the terrace, their voices travelling across the lawn in a subdued murmur, Sir Roden and Doctor Drury paced to and fro in animated conversation. They had early discovered a strong link between them, in their common knowledge of persons and places in India, and the Doctor and his lively son were already frequent visitors to Prior's Mead.

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"And why are you not on the swing with the others?" inquired Lady Haverfield presently.

"I saw you sitting here, Mums darling, and thought you might be lonely," replied the child. She was silent for a moment, drinking in the beauty of the scene before her with appreciative eyes. "It's wonderful, all this," she went on. "It all seems too good to be true. Something new seems to have happened every day since you came home. I shouldn't think any more exciting things could possibly happen—not just yet at any rate."

Which remark serves to show just how little the average human being knows of the events of the future—a future perhaps only an hour or two distant.

"Daddy and Doctor Drury seem to have disappeared," remarked Lady Haverfield after a moment.

"Yes, I saw them," replied Nancy dreamily. "They went indoors. Doctor Drury seemed to be saying something, and then Daddy stopped walking and grabbed him by the arm, and looked very surprised. Then they both went indoors. Perhaps Doctor Drury remembered a case very suddenly and wants to be going."

Silence fell in the garden again after that, for the ever energetic Dick had wearied of swinging, and wandered off in search of further adventure, followed by Flavia, who in all things was his obedient slave.

Suddenly one of the mullioned windows of the smoking-room, to the right of the great front entrance,

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swung open, and the head and shoulders of Sir Roden appeared in the aperture. A moment later the velvety silence of the evening was broken by his voice calling in urgent tones to his wife.

"Athalie, could you come to me here? I would like to speak to you."

Lady Haverfield rose and crossed the lawn, and for the next half-hour the silence under the trees was as profound as it had been before her departure. Nancy, sitting quietly on the seat where her mother had left her, shivered slightly with the increasing cold of the evening, and began to wonder whether the rest of the party would not soon reappear.

At length a light flashed into being in the smoking-room, and to her surprise Nancy could see three figures within.

"Doctor Drury can't be gone then," she reflected. "Flavia must be with Dick still. I was wondering where she was."

A moment later she saw the parlourmaid approach the windows and pull down the blinds. Then Richards, her mother's own maid, came out of the front door and down the terrace steps.

"Her ladyship wishes me to take you back to St Hilda's at once, Miss Nancy. She says she is engaged now, with my master and Doctor Drury, and will be unable to see you to-night. She wishes you good-night, and sends her love, and asked me to say that you will be fetched to-morrow afternoon as usual."

Nancy rose from her seat without demur, and

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having sought out Flavia to say good-night, she allowed herself to be escorted back to school submissively enough, but it was with a puzzled heart that she made her way through the village. Throughout her short life, provided they had been together, she could remember no occasion on which her mother had suffered her to go to bed without a personal 'good-night.' Something serious must indeed have happened to account for this!

It was two hours later, and the light still burned in the smoking-room at Prior's Mead. Flavia had long since been swept off to bed, and Dick, having waited in vain for the Doctor, had left a message with one of the maids, and gone home. In the smoking-room Doctor Drury finished a minute examination of the small object he held, and raised his head. His voice trembled a little, and there was in his eyes the light of a great renunciation.

"There is no manner of doubt. This shoe is identical with the one I possess. I have other things as well, which you would doubtless like to see, but in my own mind I am satisfied." He was silent for a moment and then continued, as if with an effort. "This will be a blow to me, but I had rather it was you, Sir Roden, and your wife here, than any one else in the world. I tell you plainly, though, that if I had known this myself, I could never have brought myself to tell you. It is well that we both unwittingly brought it to light in conversation To-

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morrow I will show you the shoe, and the other things. Or, no; I suppose you will want to see the boy at once. I can show you then."

Sir Roden laid his hand on his guest's shoulder.
"Yes, I think we shall. It is his right."

Lady Haverfield rose swiftly and crossed the room to the Doctor's side.

"We are longing to have him, of course," she said in her beautiful voice, "but we will not take him from you at once. And even when we do, you shall share him with us. That is *your* right. I can never forget how much we owe you. Before we go to your house, will you tell me the story once again, in all its details? I can scarcely believe it yet."

"Certainly. You are entitled to know."

The Doctor leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, and began to speak slowly, choosing his words as if with difficulty.

"Prior to the death of my wife, I was, as I told you, for some years in India—acting as R.M.O. to the Downshires, who were quartered during the latter part of the time at a small and remote hill-station in the state of Surajapore. My daughter Grace was then a young girl just out from school in England, and dear as she was to me, I fear I must admit that I centred a deeper affection round the person of my small son, at that time about three years old. You see, I had longed for years for someone who would carry on my name, and to whom I could look with pride in my old age, and

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when at last my boy came, I scarcely knew how to love him enough. Maybe I loved him and my dear wife too much, to the exclusion perhaps of other and higher things. I cannot tell. At any rate they were both taken from me." The Doctor paused for a moment and then continued in a lower tone. "An epidemic broke out on the station, of some obscure native fever, and despite all my skill, my dear wife succumbed to it within a week. The boy followed her thirty-six hours afterward. I must ask you to excuse further reference to circumstances that are extremely painful to recall. It is sufficient to add that I felt myself unable to remain upon the scene of my double bereavement, and that as soon as I was able to obtain my discharge, I left the place, determining to make at once for England. As I have said, the station was a very remote one, and our only means of travel for the first two hundred miles was by bullock-cart. The district round was by no means safe, owing to a feeling of unrest among the native tribes, which had found expression in one or two isolated risings, attended with some considerable loss of life. Indeed I was warned not to undertake the journey just then, but being impatient to be off, I decided to take the risk. My daughter and I were attended by an elderly native couple, to whom the bullock-cart belonged, and with whom I had concluded a bargain for our conveyance as far as the railway. Owing to the unsettled state of the country we decided to travel by night and remain in

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camp by day. I think it was on the morning of the fourth day out that we pitched our camp in the shadow of a dense clump of bamboo. Nilgari, the old native, had gone a little way into the thicket to cut some stalks for our fire. Suddenly he came running to me in great agitation, beseeching me to follow him at once—"Most extreme quick," he said, "or both would die." I did so, and gathering that Nilgari had stumbled upon some human beings in distress, snatched my medicine-chest from the wagon as I passed. I found my servant bending over the apparently lifeless body of a native boy of about twelve years of age, lying as it had fallen, by the side of the rough, narrow track. In the arms was clasped a bundle wrapped in a tattered piece of native material. It was all I could do to force the lad's arms apart and remove the burden. To my horror, the shawl disclosed, not a half-dead Hindu baby, as I had expected, but a very-much-alive white one, who burst into loud yells at being waked from sleep. A hasty glance showed me that by some miracle the child had been preserved from all harm, and after handing it over to the care of my daughter and the Indian woman, I turned my attention to the boy, who I could see was in the last stages of exhaustion. Though it was clear that he could not recover, I determined to move him to the wagon, and if need be to remain where I was throughout the night in order to tend the lad in his last hours.

As I had expected, he died the following morning,

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but not before he had let fall during his hours of delirium a number of sentences in some native dialect, from which my servant was able to gather that the lad belonged to a tribe which made its home in the hills whence I had come. The tribe had risen in rebellion against white authority and in the course of its devastating march across country had killed or captured every white person within sight, among them my small *protégé*, whose ayah, the lad said, had put up a stout fight for life. Killing her and throwing the body into a river, they decided to hold the child for ransom, and continued their march. The little *Baba-sahib* was put in charge of the lad I had found, and he was told to follow the tribe in their march, from which, on the evening before, he had been compelled to fall out from sheer exhaustion.

"I dug his grave near the spot where I had found him and continued my journey to the railway. Two days later my daughter and I were seized with a bad attack of jungle fever, which forced us to remain for over a month in a neighbouring native village. Eventually I reached civilization about six weeks later than I had hoped, and it was to that fact that I attributed my failure to hear of any white child having been missed. The little chap's clothing was without marking of any kind, beyond the word 'London,' and the number '33X' on the sole of the nearly new shoe on his right foot. He was able to lisp his name, but so imperfectly that, as I have

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told you, all I was able to make out was the first name. Even there, as you see, I was wrong; mistaking 'Derek' for 'Dick.' Lady Haverfield"—the Doctor's voice broke suddenly—"he has been as my son for twelve years, and from the very first he wrapped his tiny fingers round my heart. He is your son; of that I have not the least doubt, and I must give him up. In my heart of hearts I hope I may some day be able to rejoice that he has found his true parents. But in the meantime I am being hit hard, and when you take the boy away, I beg of you not to let him forget the blankness he will leave behind."

CHAPTER XVII

Fire!

I REALLY can't believe it, Mums darling! I never knew of anything so exciting in my life! Just fancy Dick, whom I've known all these weeks, turning out to be Derek, and my own brother! You and Daddy will have quite a big family to look after. Three children instead of one, all in a fortnight! I don't think there's any one I'd rather have for my brother than Dick—Derek, I mean. He's heaps nicer than the Spencer boys. I keep thinking how little I dreamed, when I begged him to help me about Angela's racket, that he was my brother. I don't think he's much like me, do you, Mums?"

"No, darling, I can't say that I do. You see, he was always very like me, and you, people say, are like Daddy. But I know several little ways in which 'Dick,' as we know him, is a true Haverfield."

"Oh, yes," replied Nancy, "so do I. Have you ever noticed that he has Daddy's trick of saying 'That's so!' so often? I noticed it as soon as I knew him, and told him of it. Doctor Drury told me yesterday that Dick has said it from the very beginning, and he always wondered where it came from."

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Lady Haverfield smiled, and a tender light came into the beautiful eyes.

"I taught him that myself," she said presently, "to amuse Daddy. I remember how he laughed the first time Derek said it. It had always been such a joke."

It was now within a week of the end of this strange and exciting term. Nancy had come over to Prior's Mead as usual to spend the afternoon, and was sitting with her mother on the lawn, just as she had sat on that eventful evening, now nearly a week before, when it had been proved that Dick was in truth the long-lost Derek. The little girl never tired of hearing the wonderful story: of how, in casual conversation, certain facts had come to light which had led to Sir Roden's hasty summons to his wife; and of the long interview which had followed, in which, after close comparison of places and dates, the facts of the case had been proved.

"I can't help thinking," burst out Nancy suddenly, "what a surprise it must have been to Di—Derek, when Doctor Drury took you and Daddy into his bedroom, and you woke him and told him you were his father and mother."

She was silent for a moment, and then heaved a sigh, so heavy as to elicit from her mother an inquiry as to its cause.

"I was just thinking," explained the child, "what a pity it is that what is so wonderful for you and

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Daddy, will be so sad for Doctor Drury. For he's sure to miss Derek, don't you think?"

"Of course, darling," was Lady Haverfield's reply, "for he has taken care of Derek for a time nearly equal to the length of your whole life so far. I am glad you realize what a lonely time our good friend has before him, for we must all combine to make life as bright as we can for him and Miss Drury. We owe them a debt we can never repay."

"Here come Derek and Flavia," put in Nancy eagerly. "They've been down to the orchard to look at that new goat Daddy bought."

With glowing eyes Lady Haverfield watched the active, sturdy figure of her son, as he crossed the terrace from the house. Scorning the flight of steps leading to the lawn he ran down the steep slope and made for the pair under the trees.

"That's a topping little goat, Mother," he remarked, as he came and leant against her chair. "I think I shall ask my Father if I can do everything for it, and have it for my own."

Lady Haverfield smiled happily at the easy use by the boy of the words 'Mother,' and 'Father,' so long a stranger to her ears from any other lips save Nancy's.

"Have you two ragamuffins quite finished your ramble?" she inquired presently, "because if so, I think Nancy ought to be going back to school.

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Miss Primrose asked specially that she might be back early just this once."

"Why is that?" demanded Flavia. "The whole school is gone for a picnic. What can they want you for?"

"Miss Primrose isn't gone," explained Nancy. "She wants me in her room for a few minutes before bedtime to explain what is going to happen at the Prize-giving to-morrow. I've been here so much lately that I haven't had time to be told, and you see I ought to know, as I have to give the bouquet. I don't even know what time it is yet, or who is giving away the prizes."

Lady Haverfield rose with a smile. "Well, I think you'd better be off," she remarked. "I shall see you to-morrow at the Prize-giving. Now, Derek, are you going to volunteer to see your sister back to school?"

"Do you mind if I don't come?" put in Flavia. "Lieutenant Maynard has a dreadful muddle up in the wireless room, and I promised faithfully I'd tidy it up before he came in."

"No, I don't mind," replied Nancy; "that is if Derek doesn't mind coming back alone. Good-bye, Mums darling. Be sure you come to the Prize-giving to-morrow, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll be sure to come. Good-bye, good-bye. Don't be long on the way back, Derek."

"Will you be going into Doctor Drury's on your

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way home, Derek?" asked Nancy, as they walked briskly through the village.

"Oh, yes, I think so," returned the boy, "just to wish them good-night. It'll only be this one more night, you see, if they're coming to stay at Prior's Mead to-morrow. Why?"

"I wondered if you'd mind coming right up to school with me. I've got a packet of negatives belonging to Miss Drury—some I'm printing for Mums of you when you were little—and I promised to return them. Would you take them for me?"

The boy nodded, and began to whistle softly as they turned the corner by the Rectory. A few yards farther on the pair encountered Miss Primrose, armed with a large covered basket.

"Glad to see you back in good time," she called gaily. "I'm just going to the Rectory with a few flowers for the church. Go in and wait in my room, both of you. I shall not be many minutes. I made the acquaintance of Dick Drury years ago, but I want now to be introduced to Derek Haverfield."

"What d'you think I saw to-day?" said Dick suddenly, as they entered the grounds of St Hilda's.

"I don't know. What?"

"Why, Lieutenant Maynard walking in Prior's Lane with one of the mistresses from your school."

Nancy stared. "How funny! I didn't know he knew any of them. Who was it?"

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"The tall one who does the wireless. I hope he doesn't go spoony on any one. He's a nice, sensible chap if he's left alone. I—Lordy! what's that?"

He broke off and pointed to a sinister coil of smoke rising apparently from the terrace in front. An instant later a faint cry for help fell on their ears.

Nancy gripped the boy's arm.

"I know! Miss Harrington's cellar. She must have caught something on fire. I know that's her voice! Quick, back this way, and down these steps. Have you got your torch?"

"In my pocket."

"Flash it then, quick! This is a tool-house, there's a door in that corner. Good, now through that other door. Ah! what clouds of smoke!"

"Crouch on the floor," yelled the boy as he pushed open the last door, "the air's clearer."

What took place afterward all passed so quickly that Nancy's recollections of detail remained very vague. She had a vivid remembrance of Dick's figure framed in the doorway, lit up by the glare of flames; of a mass of blazing chemicals and retort-stands on the bench, of the roar of the fire, fed unceasingly by a stream of gas rushing from the melted lead-pipe of the Bunsen-burner—the cause of the accident—a stream which burnt as it came, rearing itself upward in a quivering, hissing tower of flame.

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An instant later, with incredible presence of mind, the boy sprang forward, and she saw him stamp repeatedly on the length of lead-piping at his feet. As if by magic the mass of flame before him died down and disappeared, as the gas which fed it was cut off, leaving only the smaller fire among the materials on the bench, and disclosing the figure of Miss Harrington, who had apparently been cut off by the flames.

"My book!" she gasped. "The blue one! All my work—"

Nancy glanced round wildly. The next moment, regardless of herself, she had leant across the blazing mass on the table, and stretched out for the precious volume round which the flames were beginning to curl. Once—twice—she made a grab at it, only to be forced by the intense heat to withdraw her hand. At last with a desperate effort she succeeded in reaching it, and clasping it close to her breast, she threw herself on the ground, rolling over and over in the attempt to put out the flames which had already attacked her dress.

Then the figure of Dick towered over her, apparently to a great height, and a moment later his coat descended upon her blazing dress, in a stifling mass, pressed down by two pairs of willing arms

An hour later, in Miss Primrose's sitting-room, Doctor Drury finished his examination of the three victims.

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"Nothing wrong," he announced firmly. "It all happened too quickly. Bobbed hair for the two ladies, I fear, for the present; and a carron-oil bandage for the young man's arm. Nothing more. No damage, as I said, beyond what a pair of barber's shears, a bottle of carron-oil and a night's rest will put right. How did it happen?"

"It was my fault, of course," explained Miss Harrington, "for using lead-piping for my Bunsen flame. It got melted through somehow, before I knew, and the whole thing blazed up."

At that moment Miss Primrose entered, and bore down upon Nancy.

"Come, my dear," she began, "I'm going to put you to bed myself, with the assistance of Matron, in the sick-room."

Nancy's face fell. "Oh, am I ill? I feel quite all right, really, except for this horrid smell of burnt hair."

"We'll soon cut the burnt hair off," promised Miss Primrose with a smile. "No, you're not ill," she went on, "but all the girls in the Blue dormitory are asleep long ago, and we don't want to disturb them. Come, your father and mother have been sent for, just to see that you are really all right, and when you are in bed they shall be brought up to you."

Lady Haverfield bent over the bed and kissed her daughter fondly.

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"Good-night, darling. I must really go now. I've stayed much longer than I ought. I thank God you are both safe."

Nancy smiled sleepily. "Good-night, Mum dear. I can't believe it's really you I've got to give the bouquet to, and you who will give me my exam. certificate. I hope I shan't look nasty with bobbed hair."

Down in the drawing-room Doctor Drury was saying good-night to Miss Harrington.

"They're a plucky pair," he remarked, drawing on his gloves. "I don't know details, but it's my belief you owe them your life. I don't think it would have been much of a joke when the fire reached the rafters in the ceiling of that cellar."

"I think you are right," returned Miss Harrington slowly. "I was absolutely pinned into that corner by the flames. I think your son's presence of mind was nothing less than amazing."

"He is not my son," corrected the Doctor sadly. "I would to heaven he were."

"Ah, I am sorry. I knew of that. It was careless of me. But you have this comfort: it is your upbringing that has made him the splendid type of boy he is, ready to take his place in great things, as he has done to-day. As to Nancy"—Miss Harrington rose and moved toward the table—"I am not sure that in saving this, she has not saved what

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I valued more than life itself—as much as life at any rate—my career, and the fruit of years of labour.”

The Doctor raised his head.

In Miss Harrington’s right hand was a thick notebook, covered in faded blue, its corners blackened and scorched.

CHAPTER XVIII

Prize-day and After

PRIZE-DAY at last! Since early morning the maids, assisted by some of the older girls and a few mistresses, had been engaged in preparing the gymnasium for the afternoon's function, and now all was finished. All the apparatus had been taken down; bowls of flowers stood in each window; the Guide colours had been brought in and hung above the platform; chairs arranged in neat rows; and the large table, piled with prizes and covered with a sheet, had been carried in and set down in its place.

Other parts of the school, too, demanded attention, for at the conclusion of the Prize-giving, the guests would be free to wander where they willed. Desks and lockers were tidied; fresh flowers put in class-rooms and dining-hall; dormitories left the model of neatness; cloak-rooms, studies, and recreation-rooms thrown open; vases of lilies and glowing brass in the chapel, as always.

Lunch was over at last, and the girls having made themselves ready, streamed into the long room and took their places. A very charming picture it made, on this fine summer afternoon, the sun streaming through the open windows upon the white frocks of the girls and the many coloured dresses of the

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visitors. The girls were agog with excitement, each trying to catch the eye of her own little party of relatives, or to point them out to her neighbour.

Nancy sitting next to Pamela at the end of a row, nursing her big bouquet, was accosted suddenly by Miss Harrington on her way to take her seat on the platform.

"Well, Nancy! We hope you won't run away from your social duties on this occasion as you did once before."

Nancy dimpled. "There are no tent-ropes to fall over here, Miss Harrington."

"Dear me! Should you try to trip over one if there were?" inquired the Science Mistress, adding as she passed on, "I think the mystery of the Third Form room is to be explained to-day."

Nancy was unable to reply, but she flashed a delighted glance at her beloved Miss Harrington as she mounted the steps.

"Did you notice her ring?" inquired Pamela, nudging Nancy's arm a moment later. "She seems to have got a new one."

"Ring? No, what kind?" asked Nancy, half abstractedly.

"Oh, I don't know. A kind of sparkly one."

Flavia, accompanied by Doctor Drury, Lieutenant Maynard, and Derek, was among the next group of arrivals, and Pamela's attention was distracted.

"She's coming here to school next term, isn't she?" she whispered, indicating Flavia with a glance.

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Nancy nodded. "Yes. We're both going to be weekly boarders."

Pamela turned round in surprise. "What! I thought you were dying to go home."

"So I am. It's all so new there you see. But we have eight whole weeks' holiday, and I do love school so, that I asked Mum to arrange it that way. Flavia is keen on it, too. She says she wants to see school life from the inside. Joyce Harwood is leaving, so Miss Primrose has promised that we shall both be together in the Incurable Ward."

Pamela chuckled. "Good. I hope your cousin proves as 'incurable' as the rest of us."

Further conversation was brought to an end at that moment by the entrance of Miss Primrose, accompanied by Sir Roden and Lady Haverfield and Colonel Ashcombe. Also on the platform were the Rector of Lexfield and Mrs Nesbit, and the Ranee of Surajapore, accompanied by her host and hostess, Canon and Mrs Wylde.

The whole school rose in greeting, and while still standing, sang the school song, during the last verse of which Mr Copping left his seat at the piano, and the clear voices rose unaccompanied, in the stirring tune.

In after years Nancy never forgot the keen pleasure with which she followed the events of her first prize-day. She retained a clear picture of the tall figure of Miss Primrose, reading the names from the prize-list, and handing each prize to Lady Haverfield for

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presentation. One by one the winners of the six Form prizes left their seats, beginning with little Alison Gower and ending with stately Helen Martyn from the Sixth. Then followed in quick succession a series of winners of prizes for special subjects, and last of all came the distribution of the certificates for the Musical Examinations. Nancy felt overcome with nervousness when her turn came, and as she put out her hand to receive the pale blue scroll, her Mother's face alone seemed to stand out from the surrounding haze. Somehow she achieved her bow and was turning to go when the Headmistress spoke again.

"Nancy Haverfield also wins Mr Copping's prize for the highest marks in her division. Incidentally, I may say that the marks proved also the highest in the school, being indeed only two short of the maximum obtainable."

Then—far differently from that other dreadful occasion in this same room—the applause broke out, loud and long, and Nancy turned to receive Mr Copping's prize, the very existence of which she had forgotten, a beautifully bound and illustrated copy of *Lives of Great Musicians*. Gladly the small girl escaped to her place to watch the distribution of the games cups and medals for the year, when Jean Lester, as captain of the tennis club, stood up to receive, once and for all, the Ashcombe Shield.

"I feel it my duty to say," remarked Miss Primrose, as Jean returned to her place, "that the winning of

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that shield by St Hilda's this year was largely due to the efforts of a member of the school entirely unconnected with the team."

Which little speech, as Derek observed afterward, afforded a splendid excuse to add a lusty pounding of his feet on the floor to the storm of clapping.

The presentation of the bouquet having been accomplished, Miss Primrose, to the surprise of the gathering, came to the edge of the platform once more. "Before we separate," she began, "I have three announcements which I would like to make. As I feel sure you are looking forward to walking in and admiring our very beautiful garden, I will make my remarks as short as possible. Firstly, we are happy to be able to announce that Sir Roden and Lady Haverfield have very kindly offered for annual competition a silver tennis-cup, to be played for in a 'singles' match. The cup will, of course, be the property of the school, but there is also a gold medal to be awarded outright to the winner. I will ask you to express your thanks for this splendid gift in a few moments. The second announcement I have to make is that we received this morning a telegram informing us that our head girl, Helen Martyn, has been successful in obtaining an Open Scholarship to Cambridge, the most valuable Scholarship of the year, and for which there were four hundred and thirteen competitors."

Even had she had any more to say, Miss Primrose would have been unable to continue, for such a

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round of applause broke out as made the roof ring.

" My third announcement," went on the Principal, " is at once pleasant and unpleasant. Unpleasant because I have to make public the news of the forthcoming departure of a very loyal colleague—Miss Harrington; pleasant because I am able to say that St Hilda's will know her often in the future. I understand that her marriage to an old friend, Lieutenant Maynard, will take place at Christmas, and that she will make her home in this neighbourhood. I have also much pleasure in making known a fact that will be common property throughout the length and breadth of England within a day or two, which is that the name of Miss Harrington will be known in future as that of a great inventor. As a result of much patient research carried on during the past months in a cellar belonging to this school, she has become the discoverer of a method by which the actual sounds received by a wireless instrument can be recorded and stored up for future reproduction. But," the Principal held up her hand for silence, " she has asked me to state a fact which is at present known only to three or four people—that the knowledge of this method would most certainly have been lost to the world by fire, no longer ago than yesterday, had it not been for the timely action of the member of St Hilda's to whom I referred in connection with the tennis match—Nancy Haverfield, and her brother Derek."

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For some time afterward, as Derek said later, the noise was deafening, and he felt much more frightened than he had during the fire.

Then in a body the girls rose to their feet to express their delight in a loyal burst of song that no one who heard it will ever forget:

“ For she’s a jolly good fellow ;
For she’s a jolly good fellow ;
For she’s a jolly good fellow,
And so say all of us ! ”

